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AN EPIC STORY OF COURAGE IN DEFEAT

BY SACHA CARNEGIE

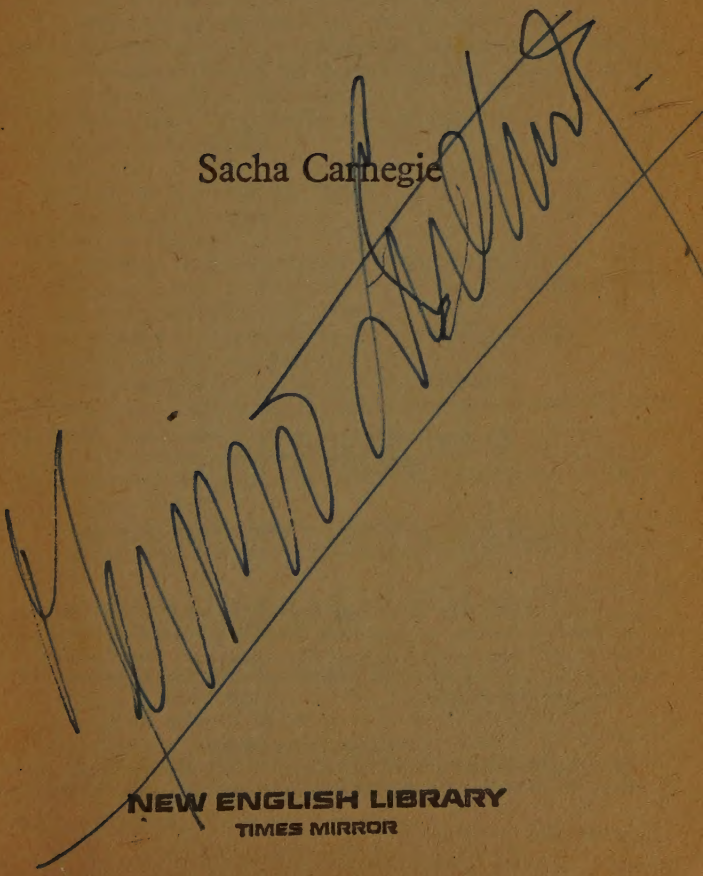


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PROLOGUE

London: April 1965

REPLACING the receiver the woman stood for a moment looking down at the man asleep on the bed. Then she shook him gently. Though he had not stirred at the sound of the telephone he opened his eyes as soon as she touched him.

'You must get up, darling. He's arrived.' She went back to her seat at the dressing-table, watching her husband in the glass. He sat on the edge of the bed shaking his head and rubbing the back of his neck with quick movements.

'I'd give a lot to be going to bed,' he said.

'Is it your side, Karl?'

'A bit, yes.'

'Perhaps he won't stay too long.'

'I very much hope not.'

He put on his coat.

'Oh, darling, your trousers. Just look at them. They're like –' She gave up, unable to find words; instead she straightened his tie, and smoothed down his collar.

'Every inch a German general,' he said with a sudden flicker of laughter in his eyes, adding:

'Worthy descendant of the Teutonic Knights.'

'Turn round,' she said, 'and let's see what you look like from the back.'

'Worse,' said her husband. 'It's bound to be far, far worse.' His hand went to his side, low down, and she heard him draw a quick, sharp breath.

'Look, darling. I'll ring down and say you're not well. Have a good night's rest and then see him. Surely it can wait, whatever it is?'

'No, my dear. I must go down. I'll be all right. Give us half an hour, then come and rescue me.'

'I will."

'I don't know what I'd do without you, Ledi.'

'Don't get sentimental, you may need all your strength.'

He took his wife in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

'And now you've got lipstick all over you. Oh, darling, really.' She wiped his mouth with a face tissue. 'How that unfortunate Corporal Runz of yours manages to turn you out so spick and span in uniform I have no idea.'

In the door he turned and asked very seriously, 'You kno what day it is, Ledi?'

'The fourteenth.'

'And the month?'

'April.'

'Exactly twenty years,' he said slowly. 'To the very day.'

'Yes,' she answered, 'I know.'

'Quite an anniversary for them to have chosen,' he said. Th door closed quietly behind him.

His wife went to the window. The hotel looked across a broa avenue along which flowed the ceaseless stream of London traffic, the big red buses standing out like great beasts caught in flood of lesser creatures. Beyond the gleaming river of vehicl the tall trees of a park shone softly in the glow of the lights an figures were hurrying home through the shadows of the sprin evening.

As she stood there she asked herself, What do they want fro him? Twice she asked that question, but the only answer was th impatient hooting of the traffic and the sudden crisp patter of a April shower on the budding plane trees. Sighing, she went bac to the brushing of her shining grey hair.

In the cocktail bar of the plush hotel a tall figure in a blu pinstripe suit rose from a seat in the corner.

'General von List?'

'Yes.' The smaller man inclined his head politely.

'Ah. My name's Lumsden.'

They shook hands.

'What about a drink?'

'Would you think me impolite if I were to ask for a glass c Lager beer?' His English was slow and correct.

'Not at all.'

Major-General Sir Alan Lumsden was tall and beautifull groomed, with a glossy shine to the toes of his black shoes an not a hair out of place. A thin gold chain was stretched acros his well-cut waistcoat and a sober tie was knotted exactly righ in the snowy angle of the stiff collar. He was every inch a Guards man – all six feet three inches of him. Beside him the small, sligh figure of the German resembled that of a little boy in his firs dark suit.

'Let's sit here. It's out of the way.'

They sat in the corner of the opulent cocktail bar. The English man ordered the drinks with an easy assurance; then he picked stuffed olive from the dish and regarded it with interest befor popping it into his mouth. No-one spoke.

General von List looked round him. There was a sprinkling o people in the place; mostly Americans by the sound of them Their closest neighbours were an elderly woman, excessivel though skilfully made up, entertaining two young men with lon

hair and pink shirts under their tight grey jackets. In profile one of them reminded him vaguely of Stempfe: the same weak chin and long pasty face.

'It's amazing what you see about these days,' said Sir Alan. 'A little different to the old days in Italy.'

When the waiter had brought the drinks, General von List raised his glass with a little smile that puckered the scars on both his cheeks into deep white dimples.

'So you too were in Italy. May one ask where?'

The Englishman also smiled before answering.

'Among other places, Monte Colle.'

'Monte Colle! So.' He heard the woman's parakeet laugh, the precious tones of her companions. He tried to see this elegant man in the blackened, mud-stained garments of war, but without much success.

So this is von List, Sir Alan thought, the man they want for the job above all the others; the soldier with Germany's highest decorations; veteran of Poland, France, Russia, Tunisia and Italy. The officer who . . .

The German's voice interrupted his thoughts.

'Tell me, please. You were there on' – he hesitated slightly – 'on this day of twenty years ago? The day they attacked the mountain.' Watching him with feigned indifference Sir Alan's answer was casually light-hearted.

'Good lord, no. Thank heavens, I'd retired from the fray by then. I stopped a shell splinter just before the attack began. Never been so delighted with anything as I was with that bit of steel.'

'Yes, sometimes wounds were very welcome.' The General's grey eyes were seeing far beyond the gold and glass of the softly lit bar. When he stretched out his left hand for an olive, the misshapen little stump of the forefinger moved uselessly with the other fingers, as though trying desperately to keep up.

'Some of it's like yesterday,' said the Englishman.

'And always it will be so.'

'If we live to be a hundred. Remember the night you blew up our ammunition dump in that deserted *casa*. God, I'll never forget that night.' He chuckled. 'We knew then we were up against damned good soldiers.' He took a drink of his whisky and soda. 'I can still hear the bang now.'

They talked of that night so long ago, still so fresh in their memories, and gradually the German lost some of his stiff shyness and became animated as they moved matches about the little glass-topped table in the way of all soldiers re-fighting their old battles. At the end of it Sir Alan summoned the waiter.

'Sure you won't change your mind and have something a bit stronger?'

'Thank you, no.'

He had not been asked to London to swop old-soldiers' tales with an ex-opponent, however charming, that was quite certain. When the wound in his side played up and the fever was threatening then it was wiser to stay off alcohol. The bar was filling up and the parrot noise increasing round them. Cut-glass knights and dragons glittered along the tops of the tall mirrors behind the bar. A girl in a red dress sat with muscular legs twined round a bar-stool; whenever she laughed, which was often, she threw back her head and thrust out her heavy young breasts at the man beside her.

'That chap reminds me of Charles Mackenzie,' said Sir Alan, smoothing the neat grey wings of his moustache. 'Amazing coincidence him ending up as your son-in-law like that. Incredible really.' He thought for a short while about how incredible it all was.

'He's doing damn well at the Staff College,' he said. 'Your daughter's going to find herself married to the C.I.G.S. one of these days if she doesn't watch out.' His eyes strayed back to the girl by the bar.

'How does she like living in England?'

'Provided she can come home to Germany now and then she is very content, I think.'

'And your wife? I expect she misses Margarethe. That is her name, isn't it?'

'You are well-informed about my family. Yes, that is her name.'

'It's part of my job to be well-informed.' He regarded the General reflectively.

'It must be very gratifying that your son, Walter' – his smile was charming – is doing so well. To have a son already showing promise of being a famous surgeon, a son-in-law with a brilliant career ahead of him, a remarkably beautiful daughter and a wife who could easily pass as a young woman.' His eyes are watching closely, thought von List, even though he smiles.

'Thank you.' He acknowledged the compliments with a little bow of the head. 'But you did not meet me here to praise my family.'

'How do you and your wife enjoy travel?' asked the Englishman, toying with the stuffed olive which had represented the little Italian village of La Quercia.

'Very much. Not that we German soldiers have quite the same opportunity for indulging in *Wanderlust* as was open to us some years ago,' said the small scarred General dryly.

'America. Australia. All NATO countries.' Sir Alan made a sweeping gesture.

'You are certainly being generous with the world.'

'Naturally I can't tell you more than the very broad outline at this particular moment. I suggested this meeting so that we

could get – as our American cousins put it – acquainted. Besides, I very much wanted to meet the man who gave us so many ruddy headaches in those mountains.' He leant forward across the table.

'This is entirely unofficial, you'll get the full details tomorrow at the War Office.' The girl at the bar screamed with excited laughter, almost bursting the low front of her dress. A stunted page-boy called shrilly for 'Mister Guggleheim, please.'

'The bare bones are these: they want an adviser on the use of nuclear weapons in a tactical role.' Sir Alan sat back in his chair. 'And you're the man they've chosen.'

'But why me? There are nearly two hundred generals on the strength of the Bundeswehr. Why not one of them, for goodness sake?' He drained the dregs of the lager.

'That I can't tell you. But you'll find out tomorrow.'

'Yes,' said von List absently. 'Tactical role? For sure I have studied these matters. What modern general has not? But adviser – ' He shook his head. 'What can I tell them that they do not already know.'

'You've written a great deal of stuff on the subject. I've read every one of your treatises, and damned good they are too.'

'But – ' With relief he saw Ledi in the doorway. 'Excuse me, please.'

Sir Alan watched him limp across the crowded room and put out his hand to the slim woman in a plain black dress who smiled in answer.

'My wife.' The General introduced her with quiet pride. Ledi von List was very striking, with magnificent shoulders and long, slender legs. Sir Alan's hand went to his moustache. She must have been quite something when she was younger, he thought as they sat down. Even now a lot of heads had turned when she came in. He wished he could have dined with the von Lists. She had one of those amazingly young faces that go so well with grey hair. Like her husband, she smiled most effectively with her eyes.

After one more drink Sir Alan Lumsden had to go.

'I'm most awfully sorry, but I'm late as it is. You must come and dine with me one night when you're next in London.' They exchanged a few more little pleasantries.

'Now I really must fly. Tomorrow then.' He held out his hand to von List. 'I'll pick you up at twelve-thirty.'

'Excuse me,' said the German general, 'but it is permitted that I tell my wife what you have said?'

'Good lord, yes. There's nothing hush-hush about anything we've been discussing. It'll probably be in all the papers by the end of the week anyway.'

He made his way out, a tall, upright figure, very distinguished in his bearing.

'He seemed very charming,' said Ledi. 'But he's left you with a

problem, hasn't he, darling?'

He shook away the frown and put his hand on hers.

'Just a little one,' he said trying to be jocular, 'just a little one. We'll talk about it at dinner. May I tell you something, Ledi?'

After all these years she still looked at him as she had done during the first months of their marriage. He was indeed a lucky man.

'I wanted to say how lovely you're looking and how very proud I am of you.'

She formed her lips into the shape of a little kiss.

'You've been playing soldiers together,' she said tenderly, pushing the matches about with a long red nail.

'Yes,' answered General von List. 'On today of all days.'

The gay chatter washed round him in distant waves as he gazed at his wife but no longer saw her, and broke a matchstick between his finger and thumb without feeling the snap of the wood.

Looking at him, she knew. She knew by his eyes. It had happened so often before: this lost moment when he returned in spirit to the mountain of twenty years ago.

'Karl,' she urged him through the noise of laughter and talk, 'Karl, it's the future that matters. Leave the past. Please leave it.'

But it was many minutes before the cloud had cleared completely from his eyes and he saw her again.

'I'm sorry, darling,' he said apologetically. 'But sometimes it's like that man said – it could all be yesterday.'

'I know, Karl, I know.'

PART ONE

Italy: October 1944 — January 1945

I

WAR clung like a dark shroud to the mountains, sweeping with the first winter snow across the rocky heights, bitter as the shell-smoke drifting on the wind that shrieked through the valleys and ravines far below.

It pressed down on the German infantry as they huddled in their alarm positions on the forward slopes, peering with exhausted, red-rimmed eyes through the storm to where the British lay on other mountains, equally bare, equally bleak.

It seeped into the bunkers and dug-outs and trenches that honeycombed the Apennine peaks, and it trickled with the dust from the concrete roofs trembling under the bombardment; it was carried on the scream of the shells and hovered, this thick, horrible stink of death and fear, above the German front line. And, more pungent still, it enveloped the stretcher bearers and the shocked, frightened burdens they carried from the line.

A man making his slow and difficult way up the steep track stepped aside to let the stretchers pass; the bearers slithered and stumbled among the muddy rocks, cursing each other and their loads with all the fluency of terrified men.

'Not so fast, for Christ's sake,' shouted a voice behind them. 'You're not carrying a load of bloody boots!' But they paid no heed, jostling forward, down the mountain and away from the shells: wild-eyed cattle running from the stench of new blood.

The wounded were jolted and tipped; one of them moaned terribly from the pain of his shattered knee as the stretcher struck against rock, but his cries were whipped away by the wind.

'Hold it! Stop where you are!' The man by the path gave the order with sharp authority.

'Who's in charge here?'

No one answered.

'Come on. I said, who's in charge?'

'Corporal Hufnagel,' said a sullen voice.

Further up the slope from whence they had come, three shells burst in quick succession, vicious red flowers in the blackness.

'Let's get out of here!' Panic trembled in the words, but none of the dark, flapping shapes moved from where they stood, hunched against the driving sleet. A figure bulky in greatcoat and waterproof cape pushed past, coming right up to the waiting man.

'What the hell's going on?' The angry face was thrust so close that the rims of the helmets clashed sharply.

'Who is it? Oh, I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realise – '

'Is this the way the wounded are usually carried down, Corporal Hufnagel?'

'No, Herr Major. But it was pretty rough up there and – ' The hurried words were drowned by the crash of the bursting shells carried to them on the storm.

'Get control of them, Corporal! Come on, man, you want to remain an N.C.O., don't you?'

'Yes, Herr Major, yes. Well, you heard, you clumsy dolts, you heard what the officer said. Is this the way to treat your wounded comrades? Is it? It may be you next time, Wedderkop. Or you, Maulhard, chucked about like a lump of meat on a slab. Right then, I want no more trouble. Understood? Right then, get them down with a bit of care. Understood? Right, get on, move yourselves! Don't just stand there, Damme, like a great smelly tart waiting for customers!'

His little party resumed their grunting, sliding progress down the mountain, curbing the wild urge to drop everything and run for the shelter of the rear bunkers. Somewhat restored by his loud show of authority, Corporal Hufnagel turned to face the officer.

'Who was it this time, Hufnagel?'

'Ration party, sir. Mule Cemetery – usual spot. On the way back – at least the boys got their grub. Christ, won't they ever learn? It's these bloody youngsters, Herr Major. Can't do anything with them. A bunch of babies in bloody nappies would make better soldiers than some of this last lot. Makes you sick the way they ask for it. Bloody hell, you'd think they wanted to die.'

'How many?'

'Five, sir. Corporal Stimme's dead. Freidart's lost most of a leg and this one' – he gestured at the still shape on the last stretcher – 'he's got it in the face.' The officer peered down to where the wet snowflakes were melting in the dark bubbling mess that had once been a man's face. 'Schneider, sir. Poor bastard. Bad luck after what he's been through.'

Schneider. One of the old men in Number One Company. He must have been at least twenty-four, thought the officer, remembering a lean, good-looking face that smiled a lot. A Stalingrad man, already wounded twice, Iron Cross, First Class, much the same as most of the other old men in the battalion. He sighed and

shivered as the wind cut through his greatcoat and deep into his tired body.

'That's the end of his fun with women,' said the corporal. 'Quite a lad with the skirts was our Schneider.' He wiped snow from his eyes with a muddy hand. 'The others got cushy ones. Free tickets out of this lot. Lucky swine. And all for a few bloody loaves of bread and a bit of stale meat. Still, the boys have got to eat, I suppose.'

'You'd better get after them, Corporal.'

'Yessir.' But Corporal Hufnagel hesitated. 'Herr Major?'

'Yes?'

'Ought you to go on, sir? I mean, they're chucking the whole bloody ironworks at us up there tonight. Worse than it's been, and that's saying something. Shouldn't you have someone with you? I mean, I could – '

'Thank you, Hufnagel, but I think I'll manage. Get after those babies of yours' – the officer's teeth gleamed in a quick smile – 'there's no knowing what they'll be up to.'

'Yes, Herr Major,' answered the corporal doubtfully. He was no great lover of officers, having experienced many of the bad ones, but Hufnagel did not want to see Grandpa Holmers splashed over the rocks. As officers went, this one was all right, and you needed someone with you on a night like this. Hufnagel listened to the rumble and crash of the shells. Christ alive, he wouldn't go into that lot alone.

'Get a move on, man. They've probably dropped everything by now and are half way to Bologna.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Major.' Corporal Hufnagel saluted in a friendly way and vanished down the track, his cape billowing like a tent.

'Thank you, Hufnagel,' said the officer to himself. Then, summoning every scrap of will-power, he turned and went slowly upwards into the roaring darkness, towards the shells. It was madness to visit the forward positions on one's own. 'I forbid you to do it, Holmers.' That's what Reinhard had said. But Colonel Reinhard was dead.

He moved very warily, carrying his helmet in his hand so as to hear the approach of the shells just that much quicker. Time after time he hurled himself flat, often winding himself on the rocks or landing heavily in a rush of brown mountain-water; time after time his cringing back was bruised by the lumps of earth and stone which rained down. At least half a dozen times he saw the flash of the shell as it struck the ground, and often it was only the instinct born in an even deadlier war – on the Somme and in the charnel-house of Passchendaele – that saved his body from the blizzard of steel and rock ripping so close above it.

He was very frightened. After all, what man with a brain in

his skull is not frightened by the scream and blast of an artillery bombardment? But, like a veteran beast of the wild that has continually and successfully evaded the hunter's weapons, he used all his skill and instinct to take him safely past the ugly, churned-up cordite-swamp of Mule Cemetery where the remnants of thirty animals polluted the air and where Corporal Stimme, that conscientious Berliner, had so recently died. The mud clutched at his boots as he struggled on, ducking his face into the pathetic protection of his hands as a savage storm of splintered rock sang wickedly among the snowflakes.

He was trying desperately to run, held back by the mud-caked skirts of his greatcoat; the breath was like flame in his chest and panted in great gasps from his open mouth. As he had done so often in his twenty-nine years as a soldier, the man implored God to grant him life, just this one more time. For a moment he thought he'd lost the way, for the tapes marking the track had been blown away, but once again God was generous and let him find the big rock shaped like a wolf's head that stood near the entrance to the Company Headquarters bunker.

As an extra reminder of this extraordinary generosity the same God, through the hands of a British mortarman some two thousand yards away, directed a mortar bomb to fall whispering – *shush-shush-shush* – almost inaudible through the storm, and burst with its flat, tearing explosion right behind him, so that the blast propelled him with considerable force down the steps and through the heavily curtained entrance of the bunker.

'Good evening, Herr Major,' said Captain Ziegler, seemingly unsurprised to see his Battalion Commander enter the bunker in this quick and undignified fashion. He picked up the Major's helmet, which had rolled noisily into a corner of the little concrete room, and put it on the table among the message pads, maps and stick grenades; after three years of almost continuous fighting, Captain Ziegler found it hard to be surprised by anything.

'Blasted things,' growled Major Holmers breathlessly. 'Can't hear the brutes coming in a wind like this.' He got to his feet, then sat down on the chair put behind him by the Captain.

'Damn it, Ziegler, I'm getting too old for this sort of thing.'

'Schnapps, Herr Major?' Captain Ziegler poured without waiting for an answer.

'Thanks.' Major Holmers grimaced as the fiery spirit burnt his cold and empty stomach. He shifted the chair closer to the stove, holding his hands to the glowing heat of the red-hot metal.

'St Barbara's busy tonight,' he said.

'How do saints come into this lot?'

'My dear Ziegler, your military education is far from complete. The good lady's the patron saint of the gunners.'

'They can keep her.'

'What's the news?' asked Holmers after a short pause.

'Much as usual,' said Ziegler laconically. 'Shells and rain, and everyone in a bad temper. A couple of hours less sleep for the brave lads in the front line and a whopping great bill for high explosive sent in by the Tommy gunners. For the last three nights a mouse couldn't have put his head up without getting it blown off.'

'So I've noticed.'

The Company Commander reported the situation in a more official way: up to the present moment two men slightly wounded in Sergeant Telling's platoon, trying to dig out a comrade half buried by a near miss.

'One day they'll learn to stay put until the hate's lifted. War's young dream, a Knight's Cross and all the girls opening their legs to the returning hero. More schnapps, Herr Major?' Without speaking, Holmers held out the mug. 'It's these youngsters . . . can't do anything with 'em . . . ' Schoolboys, infants who hadn't expected war to be howling slivers of steel mangling and maiming in the darkness of a mountain storm.

'The ration party caught it on the way down,' he said. 'Five men.'

Holmers regarded his drink.

'They should have been storming a pill-box or defending some key position, not blundering about in the mud in the pitch darkness. It makes the whole bloodstained business even more pointless when they have to die like that.'

'Yes,' said Captain Ziegler. He was a gaunt young man with the dark stain of ceaseless battle on his long, stubbled face and in his tired, restless eyes, who had long ago forgotten what it was to live without the ragged sounds of death breaking round him endless as the thunder of a gale-swept sea.

'Schneider lost most of his face.' Holmers swilled the schnapps round his teeth. 'He's probably dead by now. I hope so.'

'There can't be many of the Stalingrad men left,' said Ziegler. 'If ever anyone deserved to finish the war in a base job, it's them. Ah, well – ' He broke off as a big shell crashed on the slope above, shuddering the floor and squeezing a puff of smoke from the red mouth of the stove. From next door where company headquarters personnel talked, argued, scratched, played cards, snored or roasted their small chestnuts, a voice rose in sudden indignation, calling down the wrath of heaven on the Tommies, their sodding shells and all their sodding mothers.

'Private Eckel,' said Ziegler. When he laughed he looked young again, this other old man of twenty-six. 'He's been brewing up a special hate against them since they blew him off a latrine at Perugia or somewhere. He claims to have had a rectangular arse ever since. All for the greater glory of the German Reich. Still,

as his father's a cabinet maker, it should come in quite handy.''

Major Holmers smiled before answering.

'You talk a lot of nonsense, Ziegler,' he said kindly.

'It helps to keep me sane, Herr Major.' His eyes did not smile..

'Sanity's in short supply at the moment. You're quite right to take care of it, Ziegler.'

They got on well, these two men. One was twenty-six, the other forty-six; both had been wounded three times and both suffered considerable pain from the various bits of steel at large in their bodies. The older man had won his Iron Cross defending a short length of waterlogged trench in the Ypres Salient; the younger got his for determined leadership, counter-attacking the Anzio beach-head. They were both professionals.

'Sergeant Telling was in his usual impertinent form tonight,'' remarked Ziegler. 'Wanted me to get on to the Führer's Head-quarters and tell him all about the beauty of the Italian moun-tains, with special reference to this one. In fact why couldn't he report back personally with his platoon so they could all give their own interesting and strongly-felt views. Back in Germany we'd be clapping them inside for insubordination, untidiness, the undermining of discipline, and God knows what else besides.. Thank heavens for a nice free and easy life.'

'Thank heavens for men like Telling,' said Holmers. And Huf-nagel. And Ziegler, he thought. 'Without them there'd be even less of Germany left than there is.' Then, changing the subject, he asked, 'D'you think they'll come tonight?'

Ziegler shrugged his thin shoulders under the faded, stained camouflage smock.

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'My dear Ziegler, you should have been a diplomat.' He undid his great-coat which was steaming gently in the smoky heat.. 'Maybe. Maybe not.' He repeated the words slowly and laughed, but without much gaiety.

'Would you, Herr Major?'

'I wouldn't myself, no.'

'They'd lose their way,' said Ziegler, 'and most of their legs on the mines.'

'You must remember we are faced by amateurs, and amateurs as we have so often discovered during these last few years, rarely obey any of the better-known rules of war – possibly because they have never heard of them. In their own small, quiet way the British are even more dangerous than the Russians, for they try manoeuvres so utterly mad as to be beyond all bounds of prob-ability.' He took a knife from the dirty tin plate on the table and began to scrape the drying mud from his coat. 'But I'll stake my meagre reputation as Battalion Commander that they won't come tonight, nor tomorrow, nor the next day. I don't think they'll attack until the weather hardens – if then. They're tired,

man, almost as tired as we are – '

'Is that possible?' Ziegler rubbed at the dark stubble on his jaw and yawned as if his mouth would never shut.

'There is the maxim we all learnt at Cadet School, Ziegler. Artillery conquers; infantry occupies. Until it conquers they cannot occupy, and we've got the mountains on our side, and the weather. No. They'll pound away with the guns, but they won't try and prise us out of these positions – not yet.'

The roar of the storm outside the hidden bunker increased to so shrill a note that they could not tell whether it was the wind or a sudden avalanche of shells curving close above the crest of the mountain. As they followed the sounds with their eyes the whole bunker leapt and shuddered from an explosion that slammed hard against their ear-drums; the light dimmed to a flickering glow as dust cascaded from the roof and long tongues of flame spurted from the stove.

'All right in there?' shouted Ziegler through the outburst of savage oaths from next door, shaking his head and coughing the dust from his throat.

'Fine, Herr Hauptmann, fine,' answered a high, childish voice. 'We're looking for Weidemann's teeth.' Uncertain laughter through the red gloom.

'Damn Weidemann's teeth! Bring us some of that hog's wash you call coffee.'

'In a moment, Herr Hauptmann. The pot's fallen off the stove.'

'Hurry it up then. Never mind the excuses.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Hauptmann.'

After a nasty pause during which the light threatened to die completely it slowly regained strength, turning the dust to thin, milky steam.

'Well,' said Holmers, looking closely at the roof and finding no cracks, 'they certainly know how to build these things nowadays. Or perhaps in my day the shells were bigger,' he added wonderingly through the singing in his ears.

'Oh yes,' said Ziegler, blowing dust from the breech of his rifle, 'they can build decent enough funk-holes. But then, after all, they've had plenty of practice.'

From Spezia in the West across to Imola at the edge of the plains, the Apennines had been transformed into mile upon mile of fortress mountains. Many of the little villages concealed nests of steel and wire, many were blasted out of existence to provide deadly fields of fire. In place of the mountain flowers a vast crop of mines lay hidden in the lower slopes; and scattered in the sinister valleys of No Man's Land were the broken remains of unfortunate animals and men that had wandered over these silent, desolate places searching vainly for food. But they found nothing in the earth save explosive, and the few pitiful leaves left on the

scrubby bushes were sour with the taste of cordite.

The engineers and workers of the Todt organisation; the Army sappers, the labour battalions and the sullen men of the punishment units; Italians pressed into service; Russian prisoners; they had all broken their finger nails, strained their aching limbs and blistered their hands hacking and blasting fortifications into the very rocks themselves, in which a few more thousand German soldiers could die uselessly, but at least out of the rain.

The forward positions were sited and hidden with extraordinary skill, planned by men with long and bitter experience of Allied supremacy in gun-power and aircraft; some were no more than concreted holes in the ground manned by two machine-gunners who peered along the barrel of their Spandau through narrow slits down to the valley below, to where one day their enemies would start the long, murderous climb to kill them.

Unless a man moved carelessly in daylight the posts were invisible to the British artillery observers whose binoculars travelled minutely to and fro across the grey rocky slopes searching for a tell-tale gleam, any shape that could be of human origin. Time after time they brought down the pounding fire of a hundred guns on the shell-torn slopes, and hours later, when darkness hid the mountains, the Germans carried back their dead and wounded and set about repairing the smashed positions. Except when the mists were low or the lashing rain cut visibility to below a hundred yards, the men could not approach or leave the forward posts; many of them were entered by means of tunnels or long ditches following behind the line of a little ridge, most of which were deep in icy mud and water. The members of the First Battalion christened them worm-runs, and quite a number died as they crawled to man the positions or back to the comparative safety of the reverse slope of their mountain. But other positions, like the Company Headquarters bunker, were elaborate masterpieces of massive ingenuity, dug deep into folds in the ground, in hollows or snug behind false crests; covered in many cases by feet of earth and rock and with the entrances well below ground-level; equipped with sleeping quarters, electricity generators and stoves which spewed their sparks into the night along cunningly contrived pipes out of sight of enemy eyes.

Into the reverse slopes of the mountains were dug the bunkers and dug-outs housing the men not actually manning the very forward posts. These were connected by buried line to their platoon H.Q.s and from them the infantry could reach the alarm posts in a matter of moments.

This was a defensive position planned and occupied by men who intended to remain there for a long time.

'By courtesy of Messrs. Todt and Co. we've become an army of moles in concrete burrows.'

'You've made yourself pretty comfortable in your particular hole.' Major Holmers glanced round appreciatively.

'If you live like Comrade Mole for three years you're bound to pick up some of his habits.' Captain Ziegler tilted back in the tattered armchair, once the treasured possession of a fat and lazy Italian mayor, and clasped his hands behind his head.

'Ritzy, isn't it? Number Two Company must be a highly-sexed lot. Remind me to congratulate young Roske on his remarkably well-developed taste.' He grinned. Calendars and magazine pictures were stuck to the damp, greenish walls: highly coloured photographs of Christmas trees, blue lakes and toothy little terriers. Holmers could see no portrait of the Führer, but from every angle young women with the most enormous naked bosoms, their long blonde hair topped by saucy sailor caps or rakish top hats, leered invitingly from a dozen different poses. Whenever a shell burst close, making the naked bulb dance and flicker, Holmers expected all that glossy flesh to tremble and quiver. For a moment he closed his eyes, finding the idea most pleasant. Just behind Ziegler's head a voluptuous beauty wearing nothing but a look of frozen ecstasy and shiny, calf-length boots, performed an exciting if improbable act with a large Negro.

'Polluting racial purity,' said Ziegler with relish. 'Roske's *pièce de résistance*. God knows where he picked it up.'

'Photography's made amazing strides since my day,' remarked Major Holmers. 'And we had to make do with Hindenburg lights or candles, and a most inferior brand of erotica. All this and electricity too.' He paused, uncertain whether what he had said was funny or not. 'But I don't imagine women have altered much.' He spoke as if he'd forgotten what the creatures looked like.

'Salerno to this bloody mountain, they've travelled a long way, these camp-followers of Roske's. They haven't worn too badly either.' Some of the pictures were badly creased; one long, naked thigh was smeared with rusty blood.

'Volturno – Reinhard – Gustav Line – Trasimene – Gothic Line – to hell with the ammunition, leave the wounded, but save the pin-ups. And now the Winter Line. They'll be cold in this one, won't you, my lovelies?'

'Genghis Khan,' corrected Holmers. 'The Genghis Khan Line.'

'Genghis Khan,' echoed Ziegler contemptuously. 'About all we've got. bows and arrows. Good God, you'd think our guns had sore throats. What the hell's the matter with them? Don't they know the war's still on? Give us the tools and we'll finish the job. Wasn't that what Churchill said? Give them to us and we'll stick here for years if we have to.' Ziegler spoke without bravado. 'All we need are the planes and the shells and we'd fight the bastards to a bloody standstill.'

'Yes,' said Holmers quietly. If we'd had the tools in 1918 . . .

His sudden sharp memories were disturbed by Runz with a steaming pot.

'Coffee, Herr Hauptmann. And some chestnuts.' He might have been the head-waiter bringing the *crême brulée*.

'Thank you, Runz. And if I should happen to find Weidemann's disgusting teeth in mine, I'll – '

Runz's round red face split into a wide grin as he looked at his Company Commander. Then, as another batch of big shells landed just short of the bunker and the coffee pot leapt on the table, Holmers saw the laughter in the small blue eyes freeze to fear. The boy ducked his bullet head with a quick jerk, then raised it looking sheepishly at the officers.

'Don't worry, Runz. A very natural reaction.'

'Yes, Herr Hauptmann, thank you. It's just that – ' He stopped in confusion, clenching and unclenching his ploughman's hands.

'That you can't help it,' said Holmers gently.

The boy nodded dumbly.

'I want to do well,' he stammered, beginning to sweat.

'Of course, Runz. Right, that's all.' Runz stamped his feet as he'd been taught during his short and hurried training, turned for the door, and marched smartly into Company Sergeant Major Weber.

'Watch it, you clumsy carthose,' growled Weber not unkindly. Sergeant Major Ernst Weber resembled more than anything a short, square parrot, with his little hooked beak of a nose and small, close-cropped head. He had fought in more than five campaigns, counting a tour of duty in the Balkans where he contracted the dysentery which had remained with him ever since. He's got it tonight, thought Ziegler, noticing the occasional flicker of pain across the pinched greyness of his face. Let's hope we get down the hill before the worst occurs – the plumbing arrangements of battle headquarters can't cope with Weber's dysentery, and it's no moment for a man to be squatting in the open.

'I thought you'd like to know they're dropping a heavy load on Rommel-Ridge, Captain. It's lifting off us a bit,' reported Weber.

'Not before time,' said Ziegler. 'Poor old Simmering, he's taken a pretty good pasting over the last few nights. Lucky for him they're dug in deep as a litter of rabbits over there.'

Yet the two ridges, for all their defences, were the weakest point in the position, thought Major Holmers uneasily. Rommel and the twin ridge beyond the river and railway, Pepoli, held by nothing more than a few scattered outposts. 'Can't come to any harm, not while we hold Colle.' That's what Clausitz kept saying. Perhaps he was right, perhaps not. The ridges could suddenly become wedges splitting him off from Stutz's weak battalion on the left. Ah well, it would soon be someone else's responsibility. My God, I'd like to get drunk and sleep it off without being

woken up. Major, what shall we do now? Major this; Major, that. Never a let-up. Twenty-nine years a soldier and the pressure still mounting. Time he got back to headquarters. He didn't want to leave the warmth and safety and step out into the black dangers of the night.

'Well, I suppose I must be on my way,' he said unwillingly.

'Weidemann's got to go down the hill. It's that splinter he stopped in his arm the other night, gone bad on him. The M.O. had better take a look. I'll tell him to get his kit, if you can hang on a moment, sir.' Weber went out and they heard him getting a move on Private Weidemann.

Captain Ziegler picked up the buzzing telephone. Holmers saw him smile as he listened. 'Yes, I'll tell him. He'll be on his way back.'

'That was the Adjutant. Says he's had Colonel Reimann on the line three times complaining that they're getting all the overs on Abelle and Caprara and why the hell can't we catch them or something. He wants to speak to you personally. Something about the Second Battalion rations going astray and two of his companies only getting boots to eat. Couldn't quite make it out.'

Major Holmers girded himself for his trip down the mountain.

'Did Stempfe say whether the Regimental Commander had rung up?'

'Not so far,' said Ziegler. 'But I expect he will.'

'Yes,' said Major Holmers without enthusiasm. 'I expect so. Right, Sergeant-Major. Is Weidemann ready yet?'

'Just about, sir.'

Major Holmers held his hands to the stove before putting on his gloves. Colonel Clausitz was a great one for the telephone; always ringing up like some damned old woman who sees a lace curtain tremble and gets on to the police. Why wasn't I told? Why didn't you report those last drops of rain? Yes, Major Holmers, why? How can one command a regiment if one doesn't know everything, Major Holmers? How can one command anything if one hasn't scraped the gloss and shine of the General Staff off one's backside after five weeks at the front, Colonel?

'Private Weidemann is ready, sir.'

Major Holmers returned down the mountain through the sleet in company with Weidemann, who carried his swollen arm in a sling and clung so close to his officer that the latter was often forced to protest.

'For God's sake, Weidemann, stop treading on my heels!'

To their right and below, the shells landed noisily on Rommel Ridge in a steady stream. Whenever anything exploded behind them on the exposed side of the mountain, Private Weidemann gave an involuntary leap forward on to the heels of Major Holmers's boots.

'Look here, Weidemann, you can go in front.'

By the time they reached the collection of small farm buildings that went by the romantic name of Rocca San Michele and housed the headquarters staff of the First Battalion, both men were sopping with the large, wet snowflakes.

'Get that arm of yours to Captain Buchner,' ordered Holmers.

'*Jawohl*, Herr Major.' Weidemann hurried off to the warm comfort of the R.A.P.

And now, thought Major Holmers a shade maliciously, now to disturb our scrubbed and polished Regimental Commander at his highly civilised evening meal.

2

DISTURBED by the sudden rattle of the glasses on the tray, General Fritschauer glanced up from his table.

'It's heavier tonight,' he said. 'They're using more guns.' The British artillery rumbled with the sound of thunder beyond a distant horizon, sometimes drowning the subdued tinkle of the glasses.

'Ring up Hasse and find out if his positions are being shelled.' With his one remaining hand he flipped open the folder before him. The Chief of Staff, Colonel Freiburg, picked up one of the many telephones.

'Some more wine, Colonel.' It was more of an order than a suggestion. General Fritschauer was not very good at suggesting things. The other man present helped himself in silence, holding up the glass against the white light of the pressure lamps.

'I'm no great connoisseur of wines, Colonel,' said the General without looking up. 'A pity really. The one gap in my education I have always rather regretted. It must be fascinating, and possibly even rewarding, to recognise a vintage, a year, where it comes from, after the merest sniff. Yes, most rewarding.' He glanced swiftly at Colonel Clausitz from the corner of his sleepy, faded eyes. He saw a large man with a face ruddy from good living and smooth, silvery hair; not liking what he saw, the General went back to the folder. 'But somehow I never seem to have had the time to study the habits of the grape.'

Colonel Clausitz, successor to Reinhard as commander of the 68th Infantry Regiment, went to stand by the big open fire, warming his broad back at the flames.

'These last years have been busy ones for all of us,' he said, listening with half his attention to Freiburg's quiet, calm voice.

'They tell me,' went on the General, making a note in the

margin, 'that wines have the human ability to travel well or badly. Is this a fact, do you suppose?' When he smiled you could see for a brief moment what must have been there once, before long years of war and responsibility and pain had carved the lines and hollowed the thin, taut face to a parchment skull.

'Certainly they do, General. Take for instance the wines of Rheinpfalz or Nahe, they – '

'Hasse reports no shelling in his area,' broke in Freiburg. 'He says it's all falling on Monte Colle.'

'As usual,' said Clausitz irritably, annoyed at the interruption.

'Heavy concentrations on the forward slopes and the summit. As it's been for the last week.'

'A very large expenditure of shells and very little result,' said Clausitz with great self-assurance. 'It makes no sense.'

'To break a man's nerve is just as effective as breaking his body,' pointed out Freiburg quietly.

'There's nothing wrong with my men's nerves,' answered Clausitz indignantly.

'I never suggested that,' said Freiburg, moving to the large map on the wall. 'I was merely saying the British are not quite such fools as to throw away thousands of shells without some fairly good reason.' He picked up a ruler, using it as a pointer. 'Three roads lead from Florence to Bologna. Without these roads the Allied armies are slowed to the speed of their attacking infantry – inch by inch. To give them any chance of breaking into the Lombardy Plain before the spring they must open these roads.'

With a bad-tempered expression in his hard blue eyes Colonel Clausitz joined Freiburg by the map.

'Before they can do this,' continued the latter, 'they have certain obstacles to overcome, the chief of which is here – Monte Colle, the mountain overlooking two of the three roads. A vital mountain, Clausitz. Absolutely vital.'

'I am well aware of that,' said the other frostily.

'Good. Then it should be clear to you, my dear Clausitz, why the enemy is concentrating on Colle.'

'But why only Colle? Why not Hasse's positions? Why no shells on Abelle or Caprara? And why only at night?'

'They want to make the forward positions untenable,' said the General, who had given no sign of having been listening. 'They hope to catch your companies moving up and back, to kill your ration parties and disrupt life on Monte Colle so that it becomes not only uncomfortable but unbearable.'

'Yes, General, I agree, but why this volume of fire? They could achieve all they wanted with half the number of guns.' The wind boomed in the chimney, blowing ash across the rough, flagstoned floor.

'To soften us up on the Somme, the British gunners smashed

our trenches to bits for days and nights on end,' said the General. 'Yet,' he added wonderingly, 'when their infantry came there were still enough of us left to welcome them. It would seem to me that they are softening up the mountain, gentlemen, beginning to isolate it. And the only reason why they aren't shelling it day and night is that, contrary to the belief of every man in the front line, they have not got an unlimited supply of shells. God help us when they have,' he added wearily. Great heavens, this was stuff you explained to pin-headed cadets, not regimental commanders. He watched Clausitz from the corner of a bleak eye. The man was an excellent Staff Officer; they all said that. Efficient, capable . . . a brain to master facts and figures . . . Smart. Knew all the right people . . . Met the type on the armchair front, dozens of them. Smooth as the gloss on his boots and just as likely to crack. A regimental commander needed in Italy, why not Clausitz – yes, why not? If the strings are there, you'd be crazy not to pull them. Anywhere but the Eastern Front for men like Clausitz. And yet he had been there once, in the good old days when the Wehrmacht was storming across Russia virtually unopposed. But after his return to Germany the gallant – and sensible – Colonel had known the strings which led to the comparative safety of a Staff desk.

'Should the offensive come,' said Clausitz rather loudly, 'we shall be ready.' He returned to the warmth of the fire.

'I am sure you will, Colonel,' said the General. The Chief of Staff busied himself with the map, drawing neat little circles and squares with a red chinagraph pencil, altering various dispositions in the mountains. In the silence the vibration of the glasses never ceased.

'We have sufficient stocks of ammunition and reserve rations to enable us to hold Monte Colle for at least ten days, probably longer.'

'I am sure you have, Colonel.'

Clausitz glanced with suspicion at the General's head bowed over the folder; there was something about the tone he did not quite understand.

'Let us hope you are not required to hold the mountain for even longer.'

As the Colonel was opening his large mouth to reply he was interrupted by the arrival of an orderly who began laying the table in the corner. What insufferable affectation, thought Clausitz spitefully. Like this ridiculous business of the lamps; why, even the forward H.Q.s managed to run their own electricity, but here it was a lot of smelly lamps. He could quite well have another room, but no, he's the Spartan front-line general, commanding the Forty-Ninth Grenadier Division, with his empty sleeve and *Pour le Mérite*. This isn't Verdun, you don't have to imitate the discomforts of the men. Exhibitionism,

nothing but . . .

'Shut the door, please, Schimpf,' said the General politely.

'Herr General.' The gunfire was louder now and the air in the warm room trembled against the ear-drums.

'Is it still snowing, Schimpf?'

'Sleet, Herr General. Snow in the mountains.' Private Schimpf was a scraggy little man of few words.

'It's come early this year,' observed Clausitz. 'But it won't lie, not like Russia.'

'I don't know,' said Freiburg, transferring a battalion forward from the rest area near Bologna with his deadly pencil. 'It can be cold enough in Italy Last winter we had many cases of frostbite in the southern mountains. And some of your positions are close on four thousand feet up.'

'You were never in Russia, I believe,' countered Clausitz smoothly.

'Thank God, no.'

'I didn't have that honour either,' said the General. He had never ceased to marvel at his luck. A terrifying number of his contemporaries had vanished into the maelstrom of Russia to die or to return as disgraced commanders, broken men.

Clausitz looked into the dregs of his wine. What did these men know of war? What did anyone know of war who had not fought in the East? He felt immeasurably superior.

Honour, thought Schimpf, rubbing a fork on his sleeve. Honour they called it. Christ! He'd been all the way to the mucking Don – and all the way back with a lump of Russky iron in his thigh. Honour! Private Schimpf spat mentally.

'Schimpf.'

'*Ja, Herr General.*'

'You can go, before you burn a hole in your sleeve.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr General.'

The officers watched the little orderly limp from the room. General Fritschauer joined Clausitz by the fire, carrying the open folder; beside the burly colonel he looked small, but immaculate and shining. He too limped as he walked, dragging his left leg slightly. 'An excellent fellow, Schimpf, if a shade unmilitary in some of his habits.'

Clausitz waited politely for what might be coming.

'This is the file of your new Battalion Commander, Colonel. You might perhaps be interested in his previous record. It will give you something to go on when he arrives. Incidentally, Freiburg, shouldn't he be here by now?'

'Technically, yes. But with the trains in the state they are, he could be stuck anywhere between here and Munich.'

'If they've blocked the Brenner again . . .' began Clausitz, but the General was reading aloud, in a quiet, flat voice.

'Oberstleutnant Karl von List. Joined the Reichswehr early

'35, aged nineteen. Cadet school. Kriegschule Potsdam, where he was instructed by Lieut.-Colonel Rommel . . . yes . . . yes . . . posted to 78th Infantry . . . yes . . . and so on. Would you be so good as to turn the page, Colonel.'

'He's very young to be a Lieutenant-Colonel,' said Clausitz. 'Only thirty.' He sounded disbelieving.

'Promoted lieutenant August, '39,' continued the General without comment. 'Service in Poland . . . wounded on the Poznan Plain . . . machine-gun bullets right leg. Awarded Iron Cross, 1st Class for exceptional courage in command of a platoon cut off and surrounded.' He read in silence for a moment. 'French campaign to Dunkirk . . . Instructor at battle school . . . Captain, November '40 . . . Russia . . . yes . . . mm, yes . . . Army Group North . . . advance on Moscow . . . mm . . . mm . . . Retreat from Moscow . . . wounded Borodino.' The General looked up. 'Obviously a man with some sense of history.' He allowed himself one of his rare and charming smiles. 'Recommended for the Knight's Cross. But that particular campaign was a disaster, gentlemen, so he did not get it.' There wouldn't be many more Knight's Crosses awarded to the German Army, he thought suddenly.

'Returned to duty in time to lead his company into the outskirts of Stalingrad where he was wounded for the third time . . . bayonet in the stomach. How very glad I am I never reached the *Ostfront*.' Again the little smile. 'However, to compensate for something that must have been remarkably painful, he got his Knight's Cross, with Golden Oakleaf and Diamonds – at the age of twenty-eight.' He paused, remembering his own twenty-eighth birthday celebrated in a mine crater outside Verdun, shared with a group of grinning, fleshless dead.

'Fit for light duty February '43 . . . two months behind a desk, then to Tunisia just before the end in Africa . . . wounded again, strafing fighter . . . bullet through the face . . . evacuated. Trained recruits in the Black Forest until October 15th 1944 – three days ago.'

General Fritschauer let the folder drop to his side.

'Final posting as Lieutenant-Colonel of six days' standing to the Italian Front, to the Forty-Ninth Grenadier Division,' he said, adding:

'And let there be no mistake, gentlemen. This is the kind of man we need, that Germany needs.' The floor shook perceptibly to the steady anger of the guns.

'Instead of aeroplanes and petrol we must make do with flesh and blood. With men like von List.'

'Exactly, General,' agreed Clausitz, a shade too quickly. 'Tell me, wasn't his father General Graf von List?'

'That is correct.'

'A very old Junker family I believe?'

'Yes.' The General tried hard to find something likeable about Clausitz.

'I think I've met von List's wife. A most attractive young lady with the whitest skin you could imagine. She was at one of the Schwerins' wonderful parties.'

'Indeed,' said the General coldly.

When the telephone suddenly shrilled the piercing noise made Clausitz jump like a nervous woman; his hand jerked so violently that wine slopped from the glass. Hoping the sleepy eyes had not noticed, he wiped surreptitiously at the stains on his smart new breeches.

'Freiburg here. Yes, who – ah, Holmers, how goes it?' He frowned slightly as he listened, jotting words on a pad.

'Yes – yes – I've got that. Yes, he's here. Hold on a moment. For you, Clausitz. Major Holmers.'

Colonel Clausitz took the receiver. 'Hello, yes. I can hear it – what – hello, damn this line.' He banged the crackling instrument against his open palm. 'Ah, that's better. Where? Rommel Ridge – I see, yes. Worse than usual – yes. What casualties reported? Good – excellent – yes, I agree with your appreciation entirely. You're in touch with Reimann? Splendid, Major. And the artillery, are they warned for defensive fire tasks? Good, Major, good. Oh, and Major Holmers, suggest to Colonel Reimann that he alerts the reserve companies – yes, of course at once. I should be back at Regimental Headquarters within an hour, oh, and Major – hello – *hello* – damnation, the line's gone.' He replaced the receiver, making sure it was exactly straight on the arm before turning to face the General.

'Major Holmers, sir. Reports heavy artillery fire on Rommel Ridge.'

'So I gathered, Colonel,' said the General quite gently.

The ruddy face went redder.

'But no casualties to date,' he said stiffly.

'If I remember rightly,' said Fritschauer with his eyes shut, 'the positions on Rommel Ridge are among the deepest and strongest in this sector of the front.'

'Exactly the words of Major Holmers, General. As well chuck peas at them as use twenty-five pounders. That's what he said.'

'A nasty little gun,' said Freiburg. 'Too infernally accurate.'

'Nothing reported from the back areas, Freiburg?'

'No more than the usual harassing fire. They seem to be concentrating on the road between Praduro and Montechiaro. Mainly medium stuff. That road's just one long hole now.'

'And going by Radolo?' asked Clausitz casually.

'Quiet so far.'

'That's good,' said Clausitz, with what he thought his frank open smile. 'With the Herr General's permission, I must return

to my command.' Pompous ass, thought Freiburg. If anyone could cope it was Holmers, and Reimann wasn't exactly a novice either.

'I had hoped you would take a bite of food with us, Colonel, but if you think – '

'The sooner I can get back – ' The sooner you'll make yourself a blasted nuisance to men who've been through ten times worse with their hands tied, added Freiburg to himself. Clausitz put on his smart new greatcoat, waisted and flared in just the right places.

'As I'm sure you have already appreciated,' said the General quietly, 'Major Holmers is a very experienced officer.' Holmers could do no wrong, thought Clausitz viciously. Just because he'd fought in the First War. It was like some sort of club. He put his smart, well-set-up cap on the smooth silvery hair so much admired by the ladies of Berlin, straightened his coat, and was ready to depart.

'I'm sorry you couldn't have stayed to meet von List. However, as soon as he has rested I shall send him up to you, Colonel. Let us hope the poor fellow doesn't have to take over his new command in the middle of a battle. You're sure we cannot tempt you to some of Schimpf's stew?'

'Thank you, General, but no.' My place is with my men, thought Freiburg caustically, picking up the receiver of another telephone. 'That you, Bachner? Any sign of the petrol yet? Well, what the devil's happened to it this time? Come off it, man, they've been grounded by the weather for the last week. All right, Bachner, I know it's not your fault, it's never anyone's fault, but what d'you suggest we put in our trucks? Olive oil? Let me know as soon as the stuff arrives.' He slammed down the instrument as though it was burning his hand. 'Bloody useless way of trying to fight a war. You off, Clausitz? Happy trip. Don't use up too much petrol dodging the shells.' That made him feel better. Colonel Clausitz clicked his heels in the approved manner of the Wehrmacht, gave the Nazi salute and took his leave. They heard him shouting for his driver. A log crumbled in a shower of sparks.

'We'll soon be walking,' said the General. 'Still, that shouldn't worry us. We are, after all, infantry.'

'You know, General, what strikes me about Clausitz – ' But at that moment Private Schimpf appeared, borne down by a large flowered bowl covered by a cloth. The General watched the little soldier in silence as he bustled about, putting the finishing touches to the sparse array of cutlery.

'And now, Schimpf, what have you for us this evening?' As he had asked for the last God knows how many evenings.

'Stew, Herr General,' answered the orderly cheerfully, as he had done for the same number of evenings.

'And in the stew, Schimpf?' It had become a sort of game.

'A surprise from Kopelski, Herr General,' said Schimpf, strictly to attention. Kopelski was the cook from Silesia, and in his simple way an artist, provided he stayed off cooking.

'Kopelski still manages to surprise us,' said the General very seriously. 'Please.' With all the courtesy of an old-world host, General Fritschauer motioned his Chief of Staff towards the meagre table decorated with the perfectly hideous paper flowers rescued by Schimpf from the ruins of the village church.

They ate in silence, concentrating hard on the chewing of Kopelski's unidentifiable pieces of meat that lurked here and there among the small hard potatoes and stringy lentils.

'Delicious,' said the General, wiping his thin lips fastidiously on one of Schimpf's paper napkins, also something to do with the gutted church.

'Tell me, Schimpf, this shelling, what does it mean?'

'To keep the lads awake, sir. Or to cover a change-over in the Tommy lines.'

'Not an attack?'

'On a night like this? In them mountains?' Schimpf regarded his General as though he'd taken leave of his senses. 'Like a lot of blind sheep, they'd be, belting about popping off the mines like fire-crackers.' He suddenly stopped, as if frightened by this sudden spate of words.

'If Tommy 'as a go tonight then I'm a dead Cossack,' he added to make his point of view quite clear.

'You know, Schimpf, you should be given an army corps,' said Colonel Freiburg, fishing round in the bowl for more meat.

'Yes, Herr Oberst,' said Private Schimpf quite seriously.

The meal progressed as the logs sparked and hissed and outside the sleety snow filled the black night, swirling over the roofs of Rocca Castellino, the small, fortified village that comprised the General's advanced headquarters.

'It's been a long time, Karl,' said General Fritschauer, drawing his greatcoat closer round his pyjamas.

'Nineteen forty-one. When you came to Marienwald just before father's death.'

'Over three years? Is it really so long ago?' The General shook his head slowly. 'You have a good memory.' He shivered as a sudden gust of wind stirred ash from the fringes of the fire.

'Put on another log, Karl.' Watching his godson throw on the twisted oak logs the General said:

'I loved that place.'

In the thin little flames he saw the plain white house lying within sight and smell of the grey Baltic; he remembered the gentle monotony of the sea surging in the pale summer nights and the wild cries of the gulls swooping and soaring in the light

sea-winds.

'I remember – ' he began, then stopped; old men remember.

'How many times have you been back since then?'

'Once. For two days.'

Karl von List sat down, dusting the ash from his breeches. He's very unlike the popular conception of a Teutonic hero, thought the General. But how remarkably like his father: the same slight build, the same way of holding his small, neat head, slightly on one side as though always listening for something; the same straight nose and dark hair. The eyes of course were Margarethe's, not so beautiful perhaps, but the same shade of grey, and he had his mother's mouth, though the lips were certainly tighter. An expressive face even in repose, but what else could you expect with those parents? A proud, watchful look. Like a sensitive hawk, thought the General, smiling to himself at the fanciful idea. But Margarethe's cheeks had not been starred by twin white wounds, almost identical; the lustrous quality of her skin had been one of her many attractions. There the General broke off his thoughts abruptly, sat up very straight, holding his hand to the warmth.

'How old are you, Karl?'

'Thirty, sir.'

'Thirty? Good heavens, I remember – ' There he went again. 'I haven't been much of a godfather to you, I'm afraid. No presents and not much religious instruction. I promised your mother I'd look after you – ' His mouth shut in its long, hard line. 'My only excuse is that, like all of us in these stirring days, I've had a lot on my mind. Not that she'd take it as an excuse,' he added quietly. Had there ever been a time when he hadn't borne the most monstrous problems of life and death upon his tired and aching shoulders? When, feigning toughness or indifference, he hadn't sent men out to die and so enable a few little coloured pins to be moved minutely on the maps? He shivered and pulled his chair closer to the fire. He'd loved Margarethe von List so very deeply, and yet . . . If he had to order her favourite son to his death, he would do so. That was the terrible part of it; that was what made him a general with red stripes down his breeches and golden oak leaves on his collar.

'What will become of Marienwald?' he asked sadly.

'The Russian guns will knock it down,' said von List in the brisk voice of a man pretending he does not care. 'We've seen a lot of homes knocked down since thirty-nine. Polish homes. French homes. Russian homes.' He glanced round the shabby room and at the cracked ceiling. 'Italian homes. And now – '

'And now it is our turn? Is that what you mean, Karl?'

'Yes. That's what I mean.'

'You want this to happen to Germany?' Gently.

'It is happening.' Flatly. 'The bombers are doing a fine job.'

The British guns were silent now; there had been no word of an attack; Colonel Clausitz could have stayed to eat Kopelski's stew. As if in sympathy with the general mood outside, the wind had slackened and, except for the purring of the lamp, it was quiet in the small peasant room.

'I asked for you, Karl. A man of your fighting record is needed here.' That at least he'd done: his one godfatherly deed, to keep her son from returning to Russia. 'Don't look so surprised. These things can still be done – if you know the right people anything can still be done.' He saw an answering smile in Karl's eyes; that was how she used to smile, with grave face, a tiny tremble of the lips and the sudden glow of laughter in the eyes.

'They must attack before the real snow comes, or wait until the spring.'

'Snow never stopped the Russians,' said von List reflectively. 'But then they are real creatures of the snowfields. Like a horde of lemmings. Or' – this time the whole face smiled, creasing the scars into deep white pits – 'one's children. They never let up.'

'Forgive me, Karl, but it is two, isn't it?'

'Yes. Walter and Margarethe.'

'I am glad you gave her that name How old is the boy?'

'Two and – ' he counted on his fingers; the same long fingers of his mother. 'Two months. Unfortunately I wasn't able to get home for his birthday. Otherwise engaged. Still, on his birthday I'll always be able to remember what the Volga looked like.' His hand moved unbidden to touch his side. 'And also the rather unpleasant feel of a Siberian bayonet.' The Knight's Cross at his strong throat caught the firelight as he shifted sideways in the chair, almost as if twisting aside to escape the steel. He laughed.

'I wonder if our bayonets hurt so much? They shouldn't, not with *Gott mit Uns* written all over them.'

'And how's Ledi?'

'She was well when I left her. She sends you her love.'

She was well when I left. What else could you say when every night the bombs spilled from the flaming sky and the fire-storms raged through the tormented streets, turning thousands to screaming torches.

'You can't have had long with her this time.'

'It should have been two days, but somehow it got pruned to seven hours. But anyway, it was seven hours more than we got before North Africa.'

'I'm sorry, Karl, you must blame me for the shortness of your time together. But, as I said, you're needed. Not that Holmers isn't capable of commanding a battalion – Major Holmers, he'll be your second in command – ' Von List listened while the General put him in the picture about the First Battalion, ending with: 'You've got some very fine men under you, Karl, but – ' he paused as a single gun fired, loud in the silence.

'Two-one-o,' said Karl, listening to the fading rumble of the huge shell. The General had seen that same look on the faces of so many men: the sharp, suspicious watchfulness of a hunting animal suddenly aware of hidden danger.

'A good gun. Are there many on this front?'

'Not enough. There's not enough of anything. Artillery, planes, transport, petrol, men. Or rather, men of the right type; the men we used to have. That's what I meant, Karl. They need someone like you, someone with your record, your decorations and reputation. I'm not saying these things simply to flatter you. I am merely pointing out that you are the chief commodity which we lack in Italy.' Too many like you have been swallowed up by the hungry vastness of Russia, he thought bitterly. 'They are tired, Karl. Many are confused in their minds and desperately worried about conditions in Germany. A large proportion of the men in this division have been wounded more than twice, a great many are youngsters wearing uniforms that should fit experienced soldiers. What will happen when the attack comes, God only knows. The recruits may fight as well as their predecessors, or they may panic and run. It's up to you, Karl, to see that they live up to the standards of what we used to be.' When we were conquering the world in a field-grey flood, thought Karl, and it was all champagne and brass bands.

'The Forty-Ninth Division's given a good enough account of itself since Salerno. So far we haven't actually turned and run. In fact the Wehrmacht has kept its laurels intact in Italy – of course our mountains don't give quite the same scope for attack as the steppes, but we've made them pay heavily for every yard of ground.' The long-range gun fired again.

'Sometimes,' went on Fritschauer, 'I find myself almost pitying the generals forced to plan attacks against mountain positions. They must have many sterile moments.'

'But only one loyalty,' said Karl von List in a tone that could have meant anything. The General looked up sharply, opened his mouth, and then decided to ignore the remark. But, as if to satisfy some half formed suspicion, he said,

'Germany has lost a great soldier through the death of Field-Marshal Rommel.'

'Rommel dead? How did it happen? When?' For the last three days he had been jolting across Germany and down into Italy in a succession of freezing trains.

'He died from the effects of wounds received in July,' said the General. 'The news has only just reached us.' His tone was matter-of-fact, but the hooded eyes never once left von List's face. 'Germany will mourn a great soldier whom she can ill spare,' he said gravely.

'Germany will know – ' Karl bit back the angry words. The bullet scars were even whiter against the rising flush.

'Will know *what*, Jarl?' asked General Fritschauer softly.

'I'm sorry, sir, but the Field-Marshal was my instructor at Potsdam. We all thought a very great deal of him. How was his death announced?'

'In him we have lost a commander with lightning power of decision – a soldier of the greatest bravery – always in the front line – inspired his men by his shining example – that sort of thing. He got a State funeral with full honours.'

'They could hardly have given him less.' There was a short pause.

'May I ask you a question, sir?'

At first the General did not answer. When he did, it was to ask one of his own.

'Are you by any chance familiar with the Order of the Day issued by Colonel-General Guderian in his capacity as Chief of Staff of the Wehrmacht?'

Karl shook his head in some surprise.

'There is no reason why you should, as the order was addressed to all General Staff officers. The date however – July 29th: of this year – may give you an idea of its significance. Nine days after that' – he hesitated for a second, gazing into the fire with eyes almost shut – 'that lamentable and altogether unfortunate attack on the person of our Führer at Rastenberg.' Again another little pause, during which the wind prowled round the building and the sound of snores came from next door.

'Among the phrases of this somewhat strange Order occurred the instruction that every General Staff officer must from now on be what the Colonel-General was pleased to term a National Socialist officer-leader, not only through his knowledge of tactics and so on but by his model attitude to political questions and his active co-operation in the political indoctrination of junior commanders.' The last words he spoke in italics.

'Do you still want to ask me that question, Karl?'

'Yes,' said Karl firmly, though he lowered his voice. 'How do you really think Field-Marshal Rommel died?' This time the pause was much longer.

'As your commanding General I must forget you ever asked such a highly improper question. As your friend I can only advise you to put these thoughts out of your head. For God's sake, for the sake of your family, Karl, remember you are a soldier and nothing else. While you wear that uniform and that cross hangs round your neck you can only think of how best to fight this war. That's our job.'

'But nothing can stop men from thinking.'

'No,' said the General, 'nothing. But not aloud.'

'Klaus von Stauffenberg was my best man,' said Karl suddenly.

'Yes, I remember.' The man next door shouted something

formless in his sleep. 'My God, what a crazy scheme. They must have known it couldn't work.' The spectre of July 29th hovered round them in the room, chill and horrible as marsh mist.

'At least he got a quick death,' said Karl.

'Witzleben. Hoeppner. I knew them both well.' The General's face seemed to have grown more skull-like. 'What a way to die.' The spectre filled that little room hundreds of miles from Rastenberg. Hitler's vengeance had been horribly thorough: the broken carcases hanging from the meat-hooks resembled neither generals nor even human beings.

'As far as I know we have no Party members in this Division.' The General sounded himself again.

'I believe they suffer badly from such things in Normandy,' he went on. 'However the good Lord in His considerable wisdom allows the generals in Italy more freedom of action.' At least we don't have the Corporal breathing down our necks and altering the dispositions of every other platoon. His thoughts gave him a certain small pleasure. Karl saw the smile turn to a yawn politely hidden behind the thin hand.

'You'll be tired, sir.' His watch said two-thirty. They'd been talking for over two hours.

'It's not often I get the chance to chat about – about other than purely military matters.' The hesitation was barely perceptible. To Karl, after thirty-five hours in trains and trucks, the camp bed in the corner looked more inviting than any feather-bed.

'You'll find the invaluable Schimpf has made up your bed in Freiburg's room. Don't worry, that man'll sleep through the crack of doom. That's him you can hear next door.' The General got up. On his feet he resembled a clothes-horse with the great coat hanging in folds and his stick ankles protruding below the striped pyjamas.

'If you go up tomorrow evening as soon as it's dark you ought to reach Regimental Headquarters between nine and ten, depending on the state of the road after tonight's performance. We're creatures of darkness here, Karl, denied the use of daylight and compelled to slink along the side-tracks. A little different to the brave old days, I'm afraid.' He sighed as he sat heavily on the creaking bed.

'Tomorrow you can go into things in more detail with Freiburg,' he said wearily. But as Karl reached the door, the General called his name.

'Remember, the paratroopers held at Cassino, as the Russians held at Stalingrad and the Poles in Warsaw.' His hand plucked at the empty sleeve, the fingers moving like blind worms. 'And the French at Verdun.' His eyes darkened with memory.

'*Ils ne passeront pas*,' he said. 'The greatest words uttered by any soldiers in any war.' He looked up and met his godson's steady gaze.

'The key is Monte Colle. I give it into your hands, Karl. See that the door stays closed.'

'I will, sir,' said Karl von List quite simply.

Before going to bed he stood for a moment by the open door of Divisional Headquarters, breathing in the cold night air. A few snowflakes swirled in sudden little gusts of wind and clouds drove fast across the half moon. As he stood there the big gun fired once more, sending its shell on a journey of seventeen miles through the cold sky.

When it burst with a distant thud, no more than the banging of a distant door, he turned and went inside.

3

Sergeant Telling was in a filthy temper. He had a bad cold in the head, the empty socket of his left eye was aching and he had just slipped in the mud and cracked his elbow hard against a rock. Stumbling along in front of the swearing sergeant, Private Kumitsch grinned in the darkness but wisely refrained from making any audible sound of enjoyment; a few paces in front of him his friend and number two on the gun, Private Kalbach, was too intent on finding the way to pay attention to what went on behind him.

The three of them were moving down the forward slope of Monte Colle towards one of the machine-gun posts. They threaded their slow way among the dark shapes of rocks and the skeleton remnants of the few scrubby bushes left above ground by the shells. They moved through the stink of explosive that lurked in the mud of the little hollows and tickled the backs of their throats.

'Get a move on,' urged Telling angrily but quietly. He knew every bleeding rock; every shapeless silhouette against the washy moonlight told him where he was.

'More to the left, pin-head.' His voice seemed very loud and carrying to Kalbach out in front faced with the dark pit of the valley below him, filled with God knows what nastiness. Why couldn't the man keep his voice down? Surely the Tommies must hear every word. Any moment the night would split apart again with the screech of shells. Kalbach's mouth tasted very unpleasant: dry and bitter, and his heart threatened to bump its way out of his thin chest.

'To the right!'

The man could be addressing a squad right across an enormous barrack square. Just because he's an N.C.O. does he think they won't bother with him? Private Kalbach was thoroughly upset by his journey to number six Spandau post.

'Watch it, Kumitsch! That's not a bloody cucumber you're carrying!' The barrel of the Spandau had swung out when he slipped, and struck hard against stone.

'Sorry, Sergeant,' muttered the sweating Kumitsch. He was swaddled in all the clothes he possessed, including the thick woolly scarf knitted by his fond mother. That was one thing about a platoon commander like Telling, he didn't mind a bit of informality in the dress, especially at night. Provided his sentries kept their ears and eyes free, and their hands, he winked his one eye at such things as civilian jerseys and long pants. He felt a sharp jab in the back and stopped at once as he had been trained, passing on the warning signal to Kalbach. They froze exactly where they stood, straining their eyes into the darkening shadows as fresh clouds rode across the moon.

Sergeant Telling tried to hear beyond the fitful sigh of the wind and the trickle of water from the melting snow, very slowly unhitching the Schmeisser from his shoulder. What he'd heard could have been the sudden dislodging of a small boulder, loosened by shellfire; they did that sometimes, drawing a burst of fire from the latest recruits. Or it could have been the sound of a boot, the butt of a carelessly held rifle, a dropped magazine. You ignored nothing that disturbed the darkness; you stopped, you waited, you listened – and you stayed alive, as Sergeant Telling had done, through the deadly nights of five campaigns.

Private Kalbach's eyes watered hopelessly as he squinted about him, clutching his rifle fiercely; ripples of shadow and pale light swam across the slope as the moon popped in and out of the clouds, promising and taunting. He hated the dark, even the dark of his own small bedroom with the flowers on the wallpaper. He had no idea why they'd stopped; Telling must have heard something; he had ears like a lynx, that man. Kalbach tried to remember if he'd shoved a round up the spout, whether you should aim high or low in the dark.

His friend Kumitsch took hold of the stick grenade at his belt with his free hand, trying to remember the drill; he had never thrown a 'potato masher' in anger. When the clouds thickened sufficiently, bringing a stronger wind, the sergeant decided to move on again. This time he took the lead, his finger crooked fondly round the trigger of the machine-pistol, stopping every few yards to listen. Another hour, and he ought to be back with his boots off – he allowed half his mind to wander; like an experienced driver he knew the various degrees of danger, he could gauge them pretty well by now, and knew how much of his professional skill was required in any given situation, how much he

ould leave to his instinct, the extra sense that had saved him so ften before. For Sergeant Telling, though far from treating ar with contempt, had its measure in a degree not equalled by any.

These two oafs behind him, blundering about like a couple of ell-meaning young puppies, Kumitsch and Kalbach, the eavenly Twins, they were pretty good examples of what the my had to make do with these days: half trained, some keen to ave a crack at Tommy, some so bloody frightened if a rat farted ey filled their pants. Kumitsch was officer material, well-oken, used his head, bloody good with a Spandau too. Pretty andy with one myself in the old days. Telling concentrated his ind on listening for a moment, heard nothing but the wind and e thump of a distant Bren gun – another forty yards or so, then ack up the hill with two more of these schoolboys, Damme and edderkop, always spouting that bloody poetry of his. He pres-ed his hand to the black patch over the aching cavity where his e had been. Carried a Spandau from Poland to the Caucasus ll they gave me the stripes, 'for outstanding leadership etcetera' nd a little tin cross instead of an eye – for a second as the long-nge gun fired he was suddenly alert. One of ours. As the shell rved high above the mountain, Sergeant Telling took the pportunity to blow his nose. It makes a noise like an express ain, thought Kalbach, how awful to be at the other end when it oes off. Kumitsch looked up as if expecting to see the great lack shape as it rumbled through the night; two-one-o, he gistered, accurate up to 29,000 yards. His father had fought at tland and by his stories of naval gunnery had instilled in young einrich Kumitsch quite an interest in such matters as trajectory, nge and lethal zones.

As the shell burst (making a splintered shambles of two British ucks carrying forward a supply of socks and tinned marmalade udding) the little party reached the hidden machine-gun post.

'Macaroni,' whispered Telling in answer to the challenge. Two gures appeared as if out of the tomb, blacker shapes against the ound from which they had risen. One of them started to stamp s feet and flap its arms about.

'Cut it out! Anything to report, Damme?'

'No, Sergeant.'

The whispers must surely reach to Florence, thought Kalbach neasily. Even more than the dark he loathed the moment when e had to lower himself through the hatchway into the horrid ttle concrete hole sunk deep in the ground; it was so horribly nstricted behind the steel shutter with only the eye-slits at ound level; cold and dank and often ankle-deep in water if a ell had blocked the little drain outside. Two hours of it. No noking; no talking during the hours of darkness, and nowhere r a man to relieve himself except by climbing up into the open.

'Right, you two specimens, in with you, and God help Germany.' Sergeant Telling waited till Kumitsch had put the Spandau in position and checked the ammunition belts left by the outgoing sentries; then shooing Damme and Wedderkop before him like a pair of hens, he set off on the return journey to his blankets in the cosy fug and stench of Platoon Headquarters.

The small, battered Fiat shot away from San Silvestro, the remains of an Apennine village housing Regimental Headquarters of the 68th Grenadier Regiment, hurling itself forward in a series of back-breaking bounds as the little wheels hit the first of the potholes.

'For God's sake – ' protested Lieutenant-Colonel von List, hanging grimly to the door handle.

'Sorry, sir, but she likes to get away to a good start. Puts her right for the rest of the trip so to speak.' Corporal Jung wrestled happily with the wheel, peering close to the cracked windscreen, pretending he could see through the pelting rain which splashed in fine spray from the bonnet and penetrated the worn canvas hood in half a dozen places. But without lights and in that teeming darkness the pretence was vain; the vehicle leapt like a frightened gazelle, landing and ricocheting off at amazing angles.

'I presume you know the road?' shouted the officer above the racket of the engine.

'Do it with me eyes shut,' came the answering shout.

'That's just what you are doing.'

They took the cross-country road to the front line, in some places no more than a water-logged cart track, for all the efforts of the Divisional pioneers to keep it navigable. But shells and the fierce autumn rains had done their work well, and soon what seemed breakneck speed slowed to a grinding crawl in bottom gear. Von List relaxed slightly, letting go of the handle, and huddled deeper into his coat; soon he turned up the collar in a most unmilitary way, to stop some of the drips. How very often he'd done this before: the drive into the unknown, always cold, always raining, and at the end of it new faces, new problems to tackle, new decisions to make. The bumping was setting off the wound in his side, that was the one to play up first; he tried to shift his position, but in that midget machine there was no room to uncross your fingers. Soon the fever would start; he knew the symptoms well – the bayonet must have been filthy – dirty lot the Siberians – the pills were in his valise stuffed in the back. Von List shut his eyes and the images flickered redly behind his eyelids. Clausitz. The name meant something, he'd heard it somewhere, but the bell was faint. Clausitz? Not a sympathetic character, Ledi wouldn't like him – 'Definitely not our type, darling.' He heard her voice, but it was that of Corporal Jung.

'Hang on, sir!' The car lurched dangerously at a crazy angle,

righted itself and ploughed on bravely.

'Good little bus,' said Jung proudly. 'We're lucky not to be walking. All the transport's going to France or some place. You'll laugh when you see what we get about in here. Buses, carts' – his words were swallowed up by the shrill scream of the engine getting the wheels through a stretch of deeper mud – 'driving about in a bleeding hearse. Come on, old girl, you can do it.' He coaxed his precious Fiat slowly along. Until 1943 it had been used by a high-powered Fascist to transport a succession of mistresses from Florence to his villa on the shores of Lake Maggiore; then, having no use for a car in a coffin, the Fascist surrendered his ownership and the small pink car joined the general transport pool of the 49th Division from where it came, no one seemed to know quite how, into the capable hands of Corporal Jung who tuned the engine, painted the body in the sober colours of war, and generally took personal charge of the Fiat, now officially on the strength of First Battalion, 68th Regiment. For use, or so some spiteful people said, of Corporal Ernst Jung and anyone he deigned to take with him. In some remarkable fashion the Fiat never seemed to thirst for petrol in the way of more common trucks and staff cars.

He gave a quick glance at the officer hunched beside him. What's this one like? Looked much the same as most of them, boots, breeches, gold and silver – still, only one small valise, that was something. He'd seen them travel! A sodding furniture van some of them needed. If a man travelled light with a toothbrush and a spare shirt, then Corporal Jung judged him more highly than the one who carted his entire wardrobe up to the sharp end. He had his own simple standards for measuring up officers. Grandpa Holmers for instance, never more than a small pack and that old moth-eaten fur coat he'd worn at some place in Poland or somewhere in the first war. Damn this bleeding road! If they weren't back soon Halser would have swiped all the schnapps. Some of us have all the luck. Sitting on his fat arse all day banging out a lot of damn silly orders on his typewriter.

Clausitz, thought von List. Clausitz? His thoughts spun round the name. Was it something to do with Russia? Not that the man hadn't been extremely affable. 'We're delighted to have you with us . . . you have come to the Sixty-Eighth with a great reputation . . . I'm sure that together we can build up the First Battalion into . . . Some refreshment? . . . A cigar, perhaps? . . . You'll be eager to go up to your new command . . .' Eager? He'd seldom felt less eager for anything.

'Hey, watch out!' The car tilted, staggered on as if it ran with its inside wheels over a precipice, then came to an abrupt stop with von List tumbled intimately against the cursing Corporal. The drumming of the rain was very loud on the bonnet. Oh no, thought the officer dully, not this.

'If the Herr Oberst could get out,' said Corporal Jung politely.

'The Herr Oberst would be delighted to,' said von List equally polite.

He stood and watched while Corporal Jung attacked the mud with furious determination thinking of his vanishing schnapps; the rain dripped from von List's peaked cap and trickled in freezing little serpents down the skin of his back.

'Here, give me that thing!' He seized the shovel and began to dig out the wheels. The mud was thick and greasy and full of stones. He was soon sweating. This'll break the fever before it gets a hold. He struck sparks from hidden stones, watched with grudging admiration by the Corporal.

'I suggest you push, Corporal, instead of standing about with your hands in your pockets.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Oberst.' Jung sprang into action. You didn't dawdle when they spoke like that. The rain fell on them steadily and heavily as they heaved and strained to dislodge the stubborn little car. First the officer, then the corporal, tried his luck in the driving seat, then suddenly, like a recalcitrant cork, the Fiat burst from the muddy hole.

'Let's hope that doesn't happen again,' said von List. 'Don't worry, it wasn't your fault.' They got back into the doubtful shelter of the car. 'No, hold on a moment.' Corporal Jung sat with his hand on the starter. There goes my schnapps. What the hell were they hanging about for? Bloody mad. Still, he'd known how to handle a shovel at least. The rain was slackening, pale gaps were appearing in the blackness where the moon tried to get through. For a while neither of them spoke. Then Corporal Jung cleared his throat in a meaning way.

'May I have the Herr Oberst's permission to smoke?' he asked very correctly.

'Of course.'

After a certain inner conflict Corporal Jung offered the tin.

'Thank you, but I don't.'

They might have been newly introduced at some social function. Bending very low under the dashboard, Jung lit the match in his cupped hands.

'If you blink on a bright day Tommy lets you have a battery all to yourself. Bit different to Africa.' He filled the damp car with a cloud of acrid smoke.

'You were with the Afrika Korps?'

'Nine months, sir. The best lot I've been with, except perhaps the Hoch und Deutschmeister at Cassino. Can't touch the old High and Mighties.'

'You know Field-Marshal Rommel's dead?'

If he had expected any reaction, von List was disappointed.

'So we heard, sir.' Jung drew heavily at his cigarette. 'King or pickpocket, we all have to go. Not that the lads wouldn't have

done anything for him.' With the suddenness of cobwebs blown from a lamp, the clouds vanished from the sky, leaving the moon triumphant. Straight ahead the black outline of a mountain thrust sharply into the gap between the storms.

'There she is, that's her. Monte Colle, the worst bitch of a mountain I've ever been on, and that's saying something. Funny, I always used to say to Irene I'd like to visit sunny Italy one day, and here I am, Ernst Jung, sitting among scenery it would cost a general's pay-packet to see in peacetime.'

'You're married?'

'Was. She copped it in Hamburg last year in one of the fire-storms.' He stubbed out the cigarette on the floor and carefully returned the stub to the battered tin.

'I'm sorry.' Would he never learn? No questions about home-life, not these days, not unless they volunteered information.

'It's not your fault,' said Corporal Jung holding himself forward against the wheel and staring straight ahead. 'It's no one's fault. One thing, I don't have to worry about the mail every day like the others.'

Six shells burst along the summit of the mountain, a string of red fireflies dancing for an instant on the crest; it was rather pretty really, though the explosions came to them uncomfortably loud.

'Can't leave it alone,' said Jung. 'Bang, bang, bang, all the time. Perhaps they're trying to knock the bastard down.'

'What's it like? Battalion Headquarters, I mean.'

'Oh, the usual collection of dirty little Ity *casas* lousy with rats and fleas. Still, I'll give it one thing. Tommy can't touch us, not even with mortars. Right up under a sort of cliff it is. Why, a couple of nights ago we had a party of S.P.s blasting off from quite close, couldn't have been more than a hundred yards from H.Q. and when the heavy stuff came back we didn't lose a trouser button between us. One of the S.P.s stalled his engine and brewed up and the Quartermaster lost one of his Christmas pigs. He was wild. Tearing about all over the place yelling blue murder.'

'But otherwise I suppose it's much the same as anywhere else?'

The shell-bursts were winking busily all over the top of Monte Colle; the front-line night was getting into its stride. Away to the right, above lower peaks, a parachute flare fled across the sky. Corporal Jung watched it sink and die below a black, cardboard crest before answering.

'Cushy enough for a man who's been to Russia,' he said.

'Have you?'

'No, sir.'

'You didn't miss much,' said his new commanding officer. This one you could talk to, decided Corporal Jung at that moment.

'They're saying the Herr Oberst has the Ritterkreuz with

Swords and Diamonds,' he said cautiously.

'They're saying correctly. But don't let that bother you, Corporal. You can tell your friends we shan't be charging the machine guns with bare hands.' Jung saw the gleam of a smile. Yes, this one you could really talk to.

'I had a cousin who went to Russia. My auntie got one letter all about the flowers and birds and things on the steppes, he was like that even though he had a job in a biscuit factory before he joined up, you know, fond of country things, good with animals. We never heard no more after that. Sixth Army bloke. Must have gone inside or under the sod at Stalingrad or somewhere. Can't have been anyone's bloody picnic, Stalingrad.'

'It wasn't.'

For generations to come the stories told by men who'd stumbled out of that hell would be part of German folk-lore; a hundred years from now the name would still stand for stupidity, fear, courage and a savagery seldom surpassed in all the long and sordid history of war.

'Oh yes,' said Corporal Jung. 'Thank God for places like Italy. Or so the *Ostfront* men keep telling us.'

In a minute, they'd have to go on, thought von List, towards the mountain, *his* mountain. He wanted to postpone the moment, to go on listening quietly to this man whom he was beginning to like; he felt curiously protected in this small, leaking car, peacefully talking, slowly establishing contact with another human being. Once he left the car at Rocca san Michele, he'd be the commander again: servant, adviser, leader to his five hundred men. He fingered the Knight's Cross at his throat; they were cunning, they gave you these trinkets to keep you going; most honourable bribes.

'What will you do after the war?' he asked.

'Start a garage, sir. We need a good one where I live.'

'Where is that?'

They'll think I've been killed on the way up if we don't go on – that ought to please Major Holmers – Clausitz had spoken of him sneeringly. 'No family background of course . . . might have been a general by now . . . same age as the Divisional Commander . . . oh, a good enough officer, in his plodding way.' Clausitz? It was Russia, but in what connection?

'Where? I'm sorry, I didn't hear.' Von List shook his head to clear the fumes of fever, feeling the sweat cold on his body.

'Ulm, sir.'

'That's on the Danube, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

He had a sudden inane desire to start humming the waltz – da-da-da-da-da, dum-dum, dum-dum – at the top of his voice, but pulled himself together sharply. Everything he said, everything he did, would be passed on to an interested audience by

Corporal Jung as soon as he got among his cronies. Better he did not announce the arrival of a madman!

'There'll always be cars,' observed the corporal sagely. 'Like pubs and undertakers, there'll always be a market.' He opened the window and stuck his head out.

'Supply party, sir. Like a bloody circus on the move. Hear 'em?' A distant mutter of sound, gradually growing louder, floated towards them. A man shouted, others joined in; the noise had a chaotic ring to it.

'Shouldn't we be moving, sir? If Tommy gets wind of this little lot – ' His hand stole to the starter.

'Very well, Corporal, we'll go on.'

But they were destined to go nowhere. The engine whirred ineffectually once or twice, then nothing happened at all except a hot smell. Oh no, thought von List for the second time, not this as well.

'I'll soon fix it, Herr Oberst, won't be a jiffy.'

Corporal Jung leapt out and opened the bonnet.

Of all the jobs that fell to him in his capacity as second in command to Number One Company the one dreaded most of all by Second-Lieutenant Dobermann was the supply fatigue. For one thing he did not get on well with animals; for another he grudged every moment away from the company. Who knew what might happen while he was in the back areas; what opportunities for glory might not slip past him? So he tried to hurry the mules, which was a stupid thing to do; mules do not take kindly to being hurried, especially those carrying heavy loads, and often up to their knees in mud.

'Push on there,' he kept ordering in a loud, hectoring tone, as befitted a German officer in the field.

'Push on! Get those swinish animals moving! D'you hear me, Corporal?'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Leutnant.'

Corporal Wiederheim, a slow-spoken man from Heidelberg who had been fighting the war when Dobermann was still picking his spots and getting excited over his school-teacher, shouted in his turn at the Italian muleteers. They for their part yelled at the mutinous mules. '*Aaah-eeeh-aaah!*' tugging and straining at the head-ropes as they did so. Mules bit each other on the rumps; now and then they lashed out briskly at anything within range. The last of the rain bounced off the lieutenant's large steel helmet; one of his jack-boots was letting in water. But these sort of discomforts were sent to be overcome; after all a man did not pass out top of Cadet School simply to be floored by a little problem like getting fifteen mules from the supply point to the Battalion. But he couldn't help wishing this sort of situation had been more fully covered in training. For about the tenth time the

leading mule decided to stop. Dobermann pushed his way along the line of jostling, bucking animals, noticing how suddenly bright the scene had become as the rain passed away.

'Look here, Corporal Wiederheim, this is no way to run a supply train.'

'No, Herr Leutnant.'

'We've got three miles to go. I suppose you realise that fact?'

'Yes, Herr Leutnant.'

The fellow was just another mule, thought Dobermann angrily. Deciding it was the moment for the officer to take complete control, he turned to face the milling mass, summoning his few words of Italian. '*Andiamo! Avanti! Subito!*' Nothing happened except the loud passage of wind, whether human or animal it was hard to tell. Flushing furiously with rage, Dobermann reverted to his own language.

'Push on! At once! I'm ordering you to get those damned brutes moving. If you don't I'll – I'll – ' His hand went to the Lüger at his belt. Then, stepping close to the leading mule he punched it as hard as he could in the ribs. The outraged animal laid back its ears, bared its long teeth to the moon and rolled a wicked eye, but did not move forward an inch. Corporal Wiederheim glanced uneasily at the shells bursting on Monte Colle. He'd been caught on this bit before; if the Ities bolted there'd be one hell of a bollocking for all concerned. And it was a bloody awful spot to be caught in. The small dark hills pressed down steeply on each side of the road, making it into as cosy a shell-trap as you could find. But he remained where he was, silent beside the biggest mule, the one carrying the schnapps.

Then, with no more fuss, the leader decided to carry on and the little convoy moved forward, docile and dignified as pack-animals in a Biblical picture. Both the Germans sighed with relief; the officer because his face was saved; the corporal because they were getting out of the defile with an even chance of saving the precious alcohol, not to mention their own skins. Their relief was short-lived.

'Now what?'

'A car, sir.'

'A car? What the devil d'you mean, a car?'

'Sitting in the road.'

'Oh it is, is it? We'll soon see about this.' Dobermann strode forward, his boots squelching and sucking through the mud. He banged loudly on the door.

'Come on then, what's this? Where d'you think you are, eh? Unter den Linden?'

The window wound down about half an inch and two eyes stared at him.

'Open up! What's going on in there? A couple of lovers mucking about or what?' Dobermann felt he was doing well.

'It's Corporal Jung,' said Wiederheim from behind him. 'That's his car.'

'I don't care if it's Jesus Christ in the Holy Grail.' Oh yes, definitely he was in form now. 'Get it out of the way or we'll tip it into the ditch.'

'I'd rather you didn't do that,' said a voice from inside the car. 'We've only just dug it out.'

Aha, thought Dobermann with relish, this is the sort of impertinence one can really get one's teeth into. He pulled open the door.

'Well, well, what sort of a comedian have we here?' he said sarcastically.

'Colonel von List, the new battalion commander,' said Corporal Jung, unable to contain himself. Dobermann straightened up like a man jabbed in the bottom with a skewer, crashing his steel helmet hard against the top of the door. In a trembling voice and clicking his heels – if heels can be clicked in thick mud – he stammered his confused apologies, throwing out his arm and Heiling Hitler twice in his agitation.

'Second-Lieutenant Dobermann, number one company,' explained Corporal Jung from the corner of his mouth, adding, 'A very keen officer, sir.'

Von List got out. Beside the lieutenant's bulk he was a slight figure.

'If I'd known it was the Herr Oberst – I – please accept – '

'Leading mules in the dark is no fun,' said von List, cutting him short. 'Anyone would be annoyed to find a car blocking the way and I can quite understand your feelings, Lieutenant.' He pressed his hand to his side, trying to rub away the sharp stabs of pain. 'Unfortunately the car has broken down.'

Seeing a chance to atone for his gross stupidity in addressing his new commander as a comedian, Dobermann saluted for the third time.

'I have two spare mules, Herr Oberst,' he cried. 'With ropes we could tow it. Yes, that's the answer!' He squelched away down the column, calling for Wiederheim, mules, ropes; in his element, a leader once more.

After a lot of furious effort and cursing on the part of Dobermann, Wiederheim, an unknown Italian and the unwilling mules, the ropes were at last attached to the front of the car.

'If the Herr Oberst would be good enough,' panted Dobermann, holding open the door.

'Thank you, but I prefer to remain where I am.'

'Very good, sir. Now then, you lot, take the strain!'

The muleteer whacked madly with his stick; the Lieutenant and the Corporal put their shoulders to the back of the machine, but the Fiat did not budge.

'Come on, put some back into it!' Dobermann heaved like a

man possessed, ploughing deep channels in the mud with his boots. Von List was seized with a sudden sharp desire to laugh.

'Stop!' shouted Dobermann. He removed his helmet and wiped his streaming brow.

'Let's think this out, Corporal Wiederheim. We're not approaching the problem in the correct manner.'

'No, Herr Leutnant.' Wiederheim was hot and fed-up. To hell with all sodding officers, he thought, his broad face quite expressionless in the shadow of his moonlit helmet. 'What we should do is – ' But what he had in mind was never clear, for, at that moment, the first of the shells arrived, shrieking viciously as they swooped close above the ducking heads to burst further back along the road. A deluge of mud pattered down and, in the sudden silence, the mules lunged forward in fright jerking the car and unjamming the starter mechanism. Then the ropes snapped and the animals went off up the road at top speed. Von List heard the guns fire.

'Get those mules moving! Get them out of it, Lieutenant!'

Any element of humour the situation might have held had vanished in the blast of the shells, very much closer this time, filling the night with singing splinters. The mules needed no further encouragement. As one the thirteen animals followed their companions, the heavy loads jolting and bumping against their lathered flanks as they broke into a clumsy gallop, not heeding the loud cries of the panic-stricken muleteers. A splinter clanged hard against the car; the moonlight was dark with drifting smoke and upflung mud.

'She's going, Herr Oberst! Hop in, sir!' Jung was shouting exultantly. 'She's going! You two, on the back, quick!'

With Dobermann and Wiederheim hanging on to the car like desperate limpets, Corporal Jung drove the Fiat flat out. From behind them came the muffled noise of six shells bursting raggedly almost exactly where the little car had been. At every pothole the pain of von List's old wound increased till he was clenching his teeth and digging the nails into the palm of his hand.

'I think we can slow down now, Corporal. Let's not arrive like a chariot race. But at least, let's get there, shall we?'

Already the huge mass of Monte Colle loomed much higher, filling the pale silver sky, a great black animal, silent and sleeping, barely disturbed by the puny little flicker of shells here and there along the dark peak.

4

WHAT a fool the man is, thought Captain Ziegler, looking at Captain Stempfe the Adjutant through the smoke of his cigar. Always talking so loudly and long-windedly of things he knew damn all about.

'In my view,' continued Stempfe, 'the Allies were quite right to bomb the Monastery as they did. After all, when you have the lives of thousands in your charge you naturally cannot let questions of sentiment enter into it.' Looks like a sheep, thought Ziegler, with his long pasty face and brown pop-eyes. 'I mean to say, what's a mere pile of stones, however old, compared with living flesh and blood?' He gazed round triumphantly, his rimless glasses glinting, confident in a telling point well made.

There were four of them in the room used as the officers' mess by Battalion Headquarters, sitting close to the fire, toasting their toes and drinking their ration of acorn coffee, smoking their ration of tobacco in a very civilised way. It was just another dirty peasant room, showing the usual signs of war's rough treatment – cracked ceiling, boarded windows, and with war's impedimenta hung carelessly about the stained walls or flung into the corners. All the stuff carried by these civilised gentlemen when they went outside: machine-pistols, map cases, a rifle, steel helmets. There was the usual fug, but more expensive somehow, officer fug.

But this particular sanctuary was enlivened by the charcoal drawings boldly executed across the walls by young Huth, officer commanding the Headquarters Defence Platoon.

'But surely,' argued Huth, flushed with youthful indignation, 'if everyone thought like that – ' He couldn't think how to go on.

'When the war's over we'll rebuild it,' said Stempfe.

'*We* will?' Ziegler raised his eyebrows.

'Of course. We aren't barbarians.'

No one spoke for a moment.

'It'll be a plum job for any architect,' observed Ziegler, who had vague ambitions in that direction. In fact, during his last spell in hospital, he had begun to study books on the subject.

'Get paid for knocking the world to bits, then get paid for putting it together again. You can't lose.' Ziegler watched the ash drop from the end of the cigar. 'Incidentally, Stempfe, what makes you think that we'll be in the position to rebuild Cassino? Or anywhere else for that matter?'

'Look here – ' began Stempfe. Really, this fellow, Ziegler, if it wasn't for those decorations and wound badges, you'd sometimes think . . .

'They got most of the treasures out,' said the man lying with his feet up on the battered sofa. This was the Medical Officer, Buchner.

'Some colonel or other, a transport man or so I heard. He organised the whole thing off his own bat, using his own transport. All the books and pictures were taken to Rome and handed over to the Vatican. Signed for, I expect.' Buchner unbuttoned his tunic and scratched his broad hairy chest. 'The man obviously thought for himself,' he said.

'Quite a change,' said Ziegler.

Stempfe fidgeted uneasily. He disliked this sort of talk.

'Take it easy, Stempfe. You look as if you expected Himmler to come crawling out of one of those rat-holes.' Ziegler smiled one of his most disarming smiles. The sheep's eyes popped alarmingly, but the Adjutant did not speak.

'The Reichsmarshal will be mad as a hornet,' went on Ziegler calmly. 'A load of loot like that tucked safely away under the Pope's thumb. I wouldn't give much for the transport man's head.'

Any moment now and Stempfe might well burst. Faint patches of colour enlivened his pale cheeks. But he was frightened of Ziegler, and only muttered something about loose talk, then, changing a subject becoming ever more distasteful to him, he said:

'I wonder what is keeping Major Jolmers? He only went across to see Colonel Reimann.'

'Tactically speaking,' said Ziegler, 'to go and smash up the Monastery was pretty damned crazy. I'd have thought they'd have known that rubble's twice as easy to defend as an undamaged building. God, what in hell's name do they put in these cigars? Mule dung? I suppose Dobermann's riding through the night like a flaming Valkyrie, trying to coax some sense into his cavalry.'

Huth laughed delightedly. He did not much like Dobermann, who was always making heavily facetious remarks about officers skulking around Battalion Headquarters, and having no head for heights and so on.

'If he doesn't show up soon, I'll have to push off.' Ziegler stretched and yawned. 'When are you coming to visit us, Stempfe? Time a bit of barrack square nonsense was shoved into them. They're a scruffy lot really.' Captain Ziegler spoke about his company with a joking pride.

'I suppose our rations are galloping into Bologna by now,' he said. 'Or joined on to a Tommy supply column somewhere.'

'The new Commanding Officer should have arrived at least an hour ago,' put in Stempfe consulting his watch. 'He left Regimental Headquarters at nine-twenty.'

'Jung'll get him here,' said Buchner. 'Throw another lump of

wood on the fire, Huth, there's a good fellow. It's getting damned cold in here.'

'They had a go at the road at about half past.' The Adjutant prided himself on his timings.

'Oh well, he's probably tucked up in a ground-sheet waiting for the padre to send him on his way.'

'I think it's a shame,' burst out Huth suddenly, turning red-faced from stoking the fire. The others regarded his round young face with some astonishment. His eyes, normally so friendly, blazed indignantly.

'Explain yourself, Herr Huth,' ordered Stempfe pompously.

'Well, that Major Holmers should be – should be replaced by someone else like this. It's – well, I think it's damned unfair.'

'Simmer down, Huth,' advised Ziegler. 'It's not the first time the right man's been passed over. And it won't be the last either. Ah, hello, Sauer, any sign of the mules yet?'

'Mules! Don't anyone talk to me about mules.' The Quartermaster bustled to the fire holding his fat hands to the heat.

'What an unholy mess,' he groaned. 'Half the rations lost on the way and mules running about all over the place. Everything quite out of control. And who'll get the blame? Poor old Sauer as usual. No food, shout at Sauer. No cigarettes, send for Sauer. Who'd ever be a Quartermaster? I'd like to see some others coping with supply these days!' In his leather coat he resembled not so much a pig as a sausage, all shiny and shapeless.

'Why?' asked Ziegler. 'Wasn't friend Dobermann dealing with the situation in his usual efficient way?'

'I wear myself to a shred,' complained Sauer bitterly, 'and what thanks do I get? There's Roske ringing up every other hour demanding new boots for half his company. Does he think I'm made of boots, or what? Dobermann? I don't know anything about him. Calls himself an officer and lets a pack of mules run away from under his nose. And now I've got to go back and sort out his incompetence. Wet nurses, that's what they all need, the whole useless crew.' He glared at Huth with his little furious eyes.

'What's it like out now?' asked Ziegler.

'Too much moon,' said the Quartermaster. 'The whole place might just as well be floodlit. Is that schnapps you've got in your mug, Buchner?'

'It was. I'm afraid the bottle's empty.' He grinned at the angry Sauer.

'There you are, poor old Sauer goes through fire and water for all you lazy swine and you don't even leave a drop of the strengthener for him.'

'You've got enough schnapps in that snug lair of yours to float the whole British navy.' Ziegler got to his feet. 'Well, gentlemen, the warrior must return to his post, even though a reserve one,

and let the war get going again. What time can we expect the rations, Sauer?'

'What time? What time this, what time that. Do you think I'm a machine, Captain Ziegler?' His thick red neck bulged over his collar, and his small reddish moustache bristled defiantly. 'You'll get them all right,' he said. 'Though God knows how without Rednitz. Isn't it about time Sergeant-Major Tomas got back?' His Quartermaster-Sergeant, the invaluable Rednitz, was acting Regimental Sergeant-Major during the temporary absence of Tomas in a base hospital with malaria. 'And now I've got to depend on that idiot, Bömkhe, who can't tell a box of mortar bombs from a sack of bread.'

'Cheer up,' said Ziegler. 'The war will soon be over, then you can go back to fleecing civilian contractors of everything including their pants.' The teasing of Quartermaster Sauer was quite a game; enjoyed by all, including himself. Though on the surface the very picture of a fat, profiteering, sly (all of which he was) quartermaster who indented for rations and cigarettes and spare clothing for men long since dead, Kurt Sauer was in fact an able and energetic man whose pride it had been through many years at the front to ensure that his battalion went short of nothing. With a skill and ruthless determination unequalled among the other quartermasters of the Division, he stole and bluffed and lied to obtain extras and luxuries for the men of the First Battalion. They knew this and appreciated it deeply, but still enjoyed pulling his short, stout leg.

'Well,' he snorted, 'I've got better things to do than sit around gossiping with a pack of old women.' Quartermaster Sauer bustled out as quickly as he had appeared, moving like many of the heavier animals, amazingly fast on his bandy little legs, bawling as he went for Bömkhe.

'I wonder what *has* happened to Colonel von List,' said the Adjutant plaintively. 'I think I'd better go out and see, just in case he suddenly arrives and there's no one to meet him.' Don't forget your bottom-licking face, Ziegler amused himself with those sort of thoughts.

'Party's breaking up,' he said, watching Stempfe disappearing with his prim, Adjutant's steps. Ziegler put on his greatcoat, buckled his belt, and took up the rifle. 'Wonder what mischief Telling's been up to? Right then, gentlemen, I bid you *adieu*.' Bending forward he swept his cap in a wide circle past his knees before cramming it at its usual rakish angle on his head. Like Sergeant Telling he always said contemptuously that the Italian front was 'not a steel-helmet war'.

'Give my love to our new chief,' he said, and was gone, striding down the passage and through the two rooms where the signallers and clerks lived and worked. Out into the night went Captain Ziegler and away, down the path leading to the pimply little hill

occupied by the company in reserve.

For a while there was silence as Huth gazed sullenly into the fire and Captain Buchner – or, to give him his proper title, Stabsartz Buchner – lay with his eyes shut, revelling in the quiet warmth.

'But why should Major Holmers be replaced in this way? It's a most shabby way to treat anyone, let alone an officer of his calibre.' Buchner pretended to be asleep.

'Why should this happen?' Huth repeated. Buchner imitated a snore. Why? Why? At their age they were always asking why. Give him another year of war and he'd learn to save his energy for something more important: staying alive for instance. Buchner had long since stopped asking questions no one could answer. Why am I here, hacking and sawing like some damned knacker's assistant when I should be performing miraculous operations that would electrify the whole medical world? Why do I have to do my work on rough tables or planks when I should be operating in the best hospitals of Germany? These were the sort of futile questions Herr Stabsartz Buchner had long since ceased to ask himself or anyone else. Why were they sending this new fellow, one of Germany's heroes, to replace Grandpa Holmers? Because he was too old and tired at forty-six to instil the proper fighting spirit into the men of the First Battalion? Was that it? Were they scared he'd put his hands up when the final push came? He heard a voice asking his whereabouts, then boots banging in the passage.

'Herr Stabsartz.'

'Yes, what is it?' He opened one eye.

'You're wanted in the R.A.P., sir. Three men wounded from Two Company.'

'I'll be there.' The doctor swung his legs off the sofa.

'No peace for the butcher's boy,' he said, reaching for his steel helmet – Buchner had seen too many shattered heads not to try and save his own. On his way out he turned and said, 'I shouldn't let Major Holmers catch you talking like that, he'll flay the hide off you.'

Captain Buchner went off to patch up the badly torn bodies of Roske's three riflemen caught by a mortar bomb as they were heading down the mountain to escort the ration party.

Captain Ziegler was going round the reserve position preparatory to burying himself deep in his blankets until dawn 'stand-to'.

Captain Stempfe paced the muddy yard, glancing often at his watch, then at the bright face of the moon, listening to the nightly quota of hate landing on the summit high above him, waiting with mounting impatience and uneasiness for the arrival of Colonel von List. If there had been a case of bad timing or in fact any kind of incompetence whatsoever then it was the Adjutant

who'd get the can thrown at him. What the devil had happened? Was that an engine he heard? No, only an enemy aeroplane floating about somewhere. It was practically impossible to hear anything above the shindy kicked up by Sauer and Bömkhe organising the ration train into some sort of order. Really, they might be training those filthy mules to perform some kind of mass trick! Stempfe stepped carefully round the puddles. It wasn't as if Holmers was the world's easiest man to get on with, but at least the devil one knows is better than the strange one, especially if it arrives in a filthy temper after God knows what kind of a rotten journey. Immersed in unpleasant thoughts the Adjutant walked smack into one of the deeper pools, splashing his shiny boots – Stempfe's special pride – right to the tops. He kicked and shook his legs furiously like a cat that has stepped in something nasty.

'Number Three Company! This way!' shouted the harassed Bömkhe. 'No, you senseless clod, this stuff's *not* for Number One. You'll just have to wait your turn then, won't you, like everyone else.'

'Come on, Bömkhe, we haven't got all night. The companies want to eat, y'know.' The organised chaos surged among the moonlit buildings of Rocca San Michele, not so many months before the peaceful and picturesque home of three Italian families.

About a mile to the north the little Fiat limped along very slowly, smelling hot, only just keeping pace with Dobermann and Wiederheim on their feet.

'Can't understand it, Herr Oberst. She's never played up like this before.'

Colonel von List, too tired and feeling too feverish to care much about anything, wondered if this awful bumping would ever come to an end.

And to the south, in the valleys of the Reno and the Setta, the energetic British gunners sent shell after shell on its way to the mountains of Vergate and Colle.

'This is Second-Lieutenant Huth, sir.' Major Holmers introduced the confused young officer. What young officer is not confused when wakened suddenly from falling asleep by the fire and confronted by his new Commanding Officer?

'It's warm in here,' said Colonel von List. He was stupid with fever and fatigue. He saw a very young and very sullen face; down-turned mouth, sensitive but consciously tightened; a rumpled shock of reddish hair. Resents me, he thought with all the clear-sightedness of fever. The newcomer, pushing out his hero, Holmers. Once he'd thought like that. What the hell! What did it matter what anyone thought? Holmers was speaking again.

'Herr Huth commands the Headquarters Defence Platoon.'

'I'm sure we're in good hands.' Von List summoned a smile from some hidden reserve of strength and sat down without removing his coat.

Huth looked at him from the corner of his artist's eye, seeing what the General had seen but more professionally. A face drawn with exhaustion; the long grey eyes bright, the starfish scars very white against the flushed skin. Huth's eyes took in the long shapely hands, filthy with dried mud; the dark red civilian scarf, the worn and stained cloth of the coat. He noticed the fine bone formation of the tired face.

When von List removed his coat Huth saw how very slim the man was; he was struck, as were most people, by the extreme neatness and compactness of the small Colonel.

'Thank you,' said von List, accepting the proffered glass of brandy. 'How very welcome.' He sipped it with his eyes shut.

'The best life-saver yet invented.' Major Holmers' voice held no particular warmth. He'd seen many of these young Lieutenant-Colonels, in both wars. With the hard faces of much older men and their tunics covered in crosses and ribbons. But this one's face was not hard; firm, yes, but without the usual traces of arrogance and impatience, and, by God, he looked ill.

To Huth the Colonel's tunic was a revelation; he had never seen anything like it during his five months as an officer. The gold stars shone in the silver braid of the epaulettes, as did the belt buckle and the very small areas of boots not plastered in mud. Ribbons for Russia, Africa, France and Poland; close combat badge in gold, wound badge in silver; the ribbon of the Iron Cross, Second Class. But what caught Huth's amazed eye was not the Iron Cross, First Class but the jewelled glint of the Knight's Cross at von List's neck. With the Oakleaf and Diamonds! Second Lieutenant Huth was fascinated and could not tear his gaze from the bright proof of great courage. He wondered what it felt like to walk about inside such a tunic.

'See if you can find Corporal Leiser and tell him to bring us something to eat.'

'Please, not on my account. I had a meal before leaving Regiment.' Huth hesitated in the doorway looking instinctively to Major Holmers.

'For two,' said Holmers firmly.

'He looks very young,' said von List when Huth had left the room.

'One of the children. The veterans and the children, that's what we are. More and more children, less and less veterans. Soon we'll be running a day school. Will the Herr Oberst not sit?'

'Don't mind me, I rather prefer standing.' Upright, the pain was not quite so savage. His eyes prickled with fever and the familiar foul taste filled his mouth. He felt quite without the will even to say he was going to bed, and tried hard to concentrate on

Major Holmers' words.

'. . . Stempfe. An admirable adjutant with all the paperwork at his fingertips. A glutton for work.'

'Thank God for that.'

In every corner of his aching body the brandy fumes seemed to be fighting with the fever germs; his head was like a balloon.

'These pictures,' he said, nodding at the walls. 'Who drew them?' Faces under high-set-up caps; a girl in a shawl walking beside a tiny donkey; three gunners, stripped to the waist, serving a gun.

'Lieutenant Huth, sir. He's quite an artist really.'

'He's more than that. They're damned good.'

Corporal Leiser brought food, laying it on a gay check tablecloth.

'Who lived in this place before us?' asked von List as they sat eating.

'Some Italian family or other.'

'It's always some family or other!' Poland. France. Russia. Thousands of families thrown out, never heard of again. Ground up in the mills of war. Holmers watched the other man as he picked at the food on his plate, putting very little into his mouth. The Colonel was not at all what he'd expected. But then, who ever is?

Holmers was talking again, something about weekly casualty figures. '. . . a steady drain. Nothing spectacular like France, but every one of them's got to be replaced from somewhere . . .' He spoke very politely; rather stiffly. They were like a couple of dogs, von List thought, sniffing round each other with hackles up till they discovered what was what. You couldn't blame him, though. After all I am pinching his job. What was it Clausitz had said? 'Quite a stupid officer . . .' He didn't look stupid. Major Holmers was slowly chewing a lump of liver sausage, his heavy jaw moving up and down with all the measured strength of some relentless machine.

'We have a magnificent Quartermaster,' he said, scratching the back of his cropped and grizzled head. 'I don't know where he finds it all.' For a second his small, dark eyes twinkled sharply. No, he definitely doesn't look stupid. There was a dull red line along the top of his broad forehead where the lining of the helmet had pressed too tightly. The hands of a peasant but the face of a dependable, intelligent man, solid and strong.

With a crash of huge boots Acting Regimental Sergeant-Major Rednitz presented himself in the doorway. After being identified to his new Commanding Officer, Rednitz, a very hefty fellow with a nose like a scarlet potato, asked if anything further was required.

'Nothing more, Sergeant-Major. Get between your blankets while you can. It seems to be a quiet night.'

'Jawohl, Herr Major.'

'By the way, have you seen Captain Stempfe?'

'No, sir. Not since the arrival of the Colonel.'

'Very well then. Goodnight, Sergeant-Major.'

'Goodnight, Herr Major.' He turned himself slightly on ram-rod legs. 'Goodnight, Herr Oberst.' He flung up his arm in salute and marched off.

'I must say, I can't get used to this Roman legion business, said von List. 'Our old salute was less comic opera. Do they al do it? During the *contretemps* with the mules, Lieutenant Dober-mann acted like some sort of wooden thing on a string. I though his arm was going to come off.' For the first time Holmers gav an answering smile.

'A lot of the older men use the Wehrmacht salute.' Holmer paused. 'I try not to notice,' he added, watching von Lis shrewdly. But the Colonel did not take the bait; instead h asked:

'Is the proper Sergeant-Major dead, or what?'

'Tomas is in hospital with malaria. He's been getting it of and on since Anzio. He should have been back yesterday. Bu with the trains all to hell – ' Holmers drank deeply of his wea beer.

'I know. It took me three days to get from Hanover to Bressa none. About a hundred and fifty miles every twenty-four hours and that was smart going compared to some journeys in Ger many now. Where do you live, Holmers?'

'Friederichshafen. On the shores of Lake Constance.'

'When were you last home?'

'Last home?' Holmers slowly repeated the words. 'It mus have been sometime in '42. Yes, that was it.' Not that there wa much to go home to: only his elder sister whom he cordially dis liked. Major Holmers was just as happy among his front-lin comrades. Von List opened his mouth to ask another questio but closed it again. It was too soon to start prying into his privat life; there'd be plenty of time for that later – if they ever got o sufficiently friendly terms. Besides, this was no moment to ge involved. He stifled a yawn, knowing that this stage of the feve could easily lead to a runaway tongue, a sort of excited verba dysentery.

'Did you say the Sergeant-Major's name was Tomas?'

'Yes.'

'Christian name Erwin?'

'That's him.'

'He was my platoon sergeant in Russia,' said von List witho surprise. He'd always had a feeling they'd meet up again som where.

'A tower of strength,' said Holmers. 'A man of the old schoo

'He was never a man to stand nonsense from anyone. Tell m

how does he deal with the children?'

'Like he treats everyone else, including most officers, firmly and fairly but always as if they're slightly lesser beings.'

'Yes,' said von List with a laugh that stabbed his side, 'that sounds like the Tomas I knew.'

Corporal Leiser brought in wood for the fire and a jug of hot water. Major Holmers mixed himself a brandy and hot water.

'A very soothing drink before bed, sir. By the way, Corporal Leiser, is the Colonel's room ready yet?'

'Yes, Herr Major. Captain Stempfe was – '

The Adjutant trotted in, like an actor obeying a hidden cue, looking immensely pleased with himself.

'I couldn't help overhearing the Major's last remark,' he said in his rather nasal voice. 'And I'm glad to report that the Herr Oberst's quarters are ready.' Corporal Leiser, who had done all the work, left the room mentally shrugging. Little bastard, he said angrily to himself, why the bloody hell can't a shell land on that egg-shaped head of his?

'I hope you'll be comfortable, sir,' went on Stempfe. 'I took the liberty of rearranging the room slightly. As Major Holmers was in the habit of – '

'Look here,' interrupted the new Colonel, 'I hope you haven't moved out on my account.' He pulled himself back from the haze into which he was rapidly falling, induced by the brandy, the warmth and this damned fever, always such an insidious enemy. By God, Holmers swore to himself, if that ridiculous little man could put his foot in it – right up to the bloody waist. With any luck one day he'd drown.

'Of course not, sir,' he said. 'I'm very happy to move in with Captain Stempfe.'

'I have detailed Private Schulz as the Herr Oberst's orderly. He's a most – '

'Thank you,' said Colonel von List, cutting off the flow. 'I'm sure Private Schulz will be admirable.' Tomorrow will be time enough to sort out this one, to arrange something for Holmers.

'Do you have partisans in this war of yours?' he asked, not wanting to hear any more about Private Schulz.

'More to the west, Herr Oberst,' put in Stempfe smartly. 'So far we have been free of the vermin.'

Vermin. A favourite German word for those who took up arms against the invader. Vermin; bandits; scum. In Russia they'd shot men and women for the look in their eyes.

'And do our ex-allies achieve much success?'

'As a nuisance value, Herr Oberst, these scum are no worse than a few horse-flies, to be exterminated without mercy.' Captain Stempfe made a squashing motion with his pale hands.

'They've shot up a headquarters or two, carried out a few clumsy ambushes, cut telephone lines – the usual sort of thing,'

said Holmers. But von List did not appear to be listening; he wa
studying the charcoal sketch of the girl and her donkey.

'Did Lieutenant Huth draw this from life, I wonder?'

'Yes,' said Holmers curtly. 'When we moved in she and he
family were still here.' He glanced at Stempfe as he spoke. Th
Adjutant had gone pale; he shifted uncomfortably in his sea
staring hard at something on his boots.

'She was beautiful in the way of these Northern Italian girls
Fair-haired, dark-eyed – didn't you think so, Stempfe?'

'They all look alike to me,' he muttered uneasily. 'Like grea
stupid animals.' If von List had turned round he'd have seen tha
his Adjutant wore the vicious, cornered expression of a weas
at bay.

'And now, like so many others, she's gone,' said the Colonel t
the drawing on the wall. 'And no one knows where. Dead,
suppose, or with these partisans of yours.'

'Captain Stempfe may know more about her,' Major Holmer
said blandly. 'He was with the advance party.'

'Why should I know anything about a fat cow of a girl?
exclaimed Stempfe in such a loud voice that von List looke
round, surprised.

'A good thing they did clear out,' continued the Adjutant mor
calmly. 'Always trying to scrounge something and poisoning u
with their filthy wine.'

'I imagine you didn't have to drink it,' said von List mildly.
sounded as if the gallant Stempfe had tried the girl and failed
And small wonder; he wasn't exactly every woman's dream. Bu
at that particular moment von List really did not care if ever
girl in the Apennines was carrying twins by the unprepossessin
fellow.

'What happened to the donkey?' he asked, to change a subje
that Captain Stempfe obviously found increasingly distastefu

'The donkey, Herr Oberst?' Stempfe's mouth remained ope

'Yes, the donkey. Did it go galloping off to join the partisa
donkeys?'

'It was killed by the only bomb to hit this place,' said Holmer
'I believe it was eaten,' he added dryly, 'by the defence platoon

'At least it met a noble end. As should all patriotic donkey
And now, Captain Stempfe, if you'd be so kind as to show me m
quarters, I think I'll go to bed.'

Mastering his stupefaction the Adjutant closed his mouth
Donkeys? Patriotic donkeys? Was the man mad, or drunk,
what?

'Of course, Herr Oberst, of course.'

When they had left the room, Major Holmers sat himself dow
by the fire and sipped thoughtfully at his hot brandy. No, h
certainly hadn't expected anything like this.

'Think of all those crosses you'll have to polish, Schulz,' his friends had chaffed him unmercifully. 'Making a hero's bed. Laying out a hero's pyjamas. Pressing a hero's breeches . . .' Private Schulz was heartily sick of their silly jokes. After Colonel Reimann's death he'd applied to go back to one of the companies; he was fed up with acting as skivvy to officers. But no. 'Sorry, Schulz, the new C.O. must have a trained orderly.' Etcetera.

Sullenly he unpacked the valise. The kit was very clean but very worn; expertly packed. Two pairs of camouflage trousers; a heavy padded coat – Schulz inspected it with interest; there was a stained rent low down, well patched. He put it on. Warm, he thought, warm and comfortable, typical officer's wear, though he'd never seen one before. He continued with the unpacking. Socks; thick underwear; three thick Tommy shirts. He brightened at the sight of the photograph frame. Phew, what a dish! Private Schulz whistled as he studied the girl in the picture. Why do the officers get the best of everything? He'd have given a week's pay for a girl to smile at him like that. Sighing deeply, Schulz placed the frame on the packing-case table by the camp-bed. 'There you are, my lovely,' he said wistfully to himself. 'Give him sweet dreams.' So overcome was he by the picture – all pine trees and water in the background – and the nostalgic thoughts it aroused in his own mind – that the orderly did not notice the rapid approach of footsteps until it was too late.

'Attention!' shouted the horrified Stempfe, his glasses flashing. 'What the devil are you up to, Schulz?'

Private Schulz spun round, knocking the frame to the floor, and sprang to attention, his freckled Saxon face aflame to the roots of his carroty hair.

'Pick it up, clod-head!' ordered the Adjutant in his most compelling voice. 'And now get out! Herr Oberst, I must apologise for – '

'Schulz,' called von List, restraining another surge of weak laughter. The scuttling orderly came to an abrupt halt.

'You might leave me my coat. I've had it a long time.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Oberst. *Ja*, I – ' Schulz tore off the Russian soldier's coat, the *fufaika*, in a state of absolute confusion and panic.

'Tomorrow, Schulz, I'll deal with you,' Stempfe said menacingly.

'*Ja*, Herr Hauptmann.'

'I think we might overlook this small incident,' von List said after the orderly had vanished at speed down the passage. 'After all, it's unlikely to affect the outcome of the war.'

Adjutant Stempfe retired, shaking his head in bemused indignation, to compare notes with Major Holmers. He foresaw difficult times ahead.

With one last long look at the picture of his wife, Colonel von

List blew out the lamp and fell almost at once into the strange, phantom sleep of extreme fatigue and fever, turning to and fro on the creaking bed, muttering her name again and again.

The wind prowled round the building and across the snow-dusted mountains, carrying on its cold skirts the uneasy murmurings of the front.

5

THE war to which Lieutenant-Colonel von List had come was, in many ways, very different to the war being waged on the frontiers of the Fatherland, both in the West and even more savagely in the East where the Red Army smashed at the sacred defences of Germany itself, showing very little mercy to the army which had ravaged its country and treated its people as the most miserable of cattle.

This Italian war was very much more of a gentleman's game, played with definite, well-kept rules not often obeyed in the bitter fighting on the Eastern Front. It was the first time von List had faced the British, except in the French campaign so long ago. Here, in these cold mountains, it was not a general's war; there was little scope for text-book manoeuvres involving armoured divisions; the tanks were unable to go mad as on the steppes; at the best they were only fit for being dug-in and used as extra pillboxes to strengthen this final defence line standing between the enemy and the plains of Lombardy. Some men he knew would have called this kind of fighting a rest cure. Except for the shells perhaps it was. No close quarter horror; no gleam of bayonets; no faces twisted by fear and hatred. But never on any front had von List experienced such shelling. The scale and the skill of it was terrifying; the accuracy was horribly unbelievable, the casualties horribly convincing. The British, who professed to despise war, had made of their artillery a weapon of such cold, methodical ferocity as had seldom been equalled. They used their guns as others used fly-swats.

The infantryman reigned supreme in the front line; he climbed and he carried and he fought the war of the sniper and the man who crept stealthily in the darkness, killing with grenade and knife. Sharp eyesight was required, and the cunning of a predatory animal. This was man against man, the hunting and killing ground for individuals. It was a war of sudden deadly little surprises where the thud of a pick in the hard ground was often audible for hundreds of yards, where voices could be heard a

clearly as if they were right beside you. During the hours of daylight the mountains were silent and innocent and magnificent; at night, when the mists rolled into the valleys or the Apennines stood cold and proud in the moonlight, then it became a live war disturbed by bursts of Bren gun fire or the hysterical ripping sound of Spandaus. Now and then there might be a muffled cry, then the mists crept back.

'November,' said von List, stopping for a short rest on the way up the mountain. 'We were half-way between Smolensk and Moscow. Remember, Tomas?'

'Another push and we'd have made it,' said Sergeant-Major Tomas looking down from his great height at the figure sitting on the rock.

'But we were played out,' he added. 'Beaten by the mud and then that sod of a Russian winter. Can you ever forget that cold, sir?'

'Never.'

It was cold enough here in all conscience with the dawn wind sweeping from the East, from where the first furtive streaks of a new day lay along the ragged peaks of sleeping mountains. Von List and his Sergeant-Major had watched the coming of day from the mountain for the last week; together they had visited every headquarters, every sentry and machine-gun post of his command. He'd been like that in Russia, Tomas thought, always on the go, always with the men, talking in that quiet way of his, making them laugh when there was nothing funny within miles. Not a hard officer, not hard enough sometimes, a leader not a driver. But he'd kept that platoon going like no-one else could have done, laughing at the cold and those bloody dark forests where the attack had ground to a stop. He didn't laugh so much now. That's not surprising, none of them did. Tomas banged his gloved hands together and stamped his feet up and down. Be light in half an hour.

'We had some good men in that Platoon of ours,' said von List. In his mind he saw them as they were when the snow and frosts came: scarecrow figures wrapped in sacking, carpets, paper, anything to keep out the Russian wind. Kater, Vierbein, Ebner – 'Remember Ebner and his cat?' He smiled as he heard Tomas snort.

'I know,' he said with gentle amusement. 'If you'd had your way, we'd have eaten it.'

'He carried that scraggy little brute all the way from Poland – yet he was a good soldier, Ebner, one of the best of the old lot.' Tomas still sounded mystified even after three years. 'You know, sir, the day he was killed he said to me, "Tomas," he said, "if anything happens to me I want you to shoot her." That's what he asked me.' The first guns of the day opened fire: eighty-eights from the Monte Vergate position over to the right. Hidden as

they were from the British line by the bulk of their own mountain, the two men could not see the strike of the shells but heard the echoes rolling in the misty valleys.

'By dinner time Ebner was pretty well cut in half by a tank and his cat crouching beside him spitting like a little tiger. I had to shoot 'em both.' Tomas paused as a big shell came sighing through the brightening sky heading for the German back areas.

'You know something,' he said. 'The cat was the worst somehow. Funny really, I suppose I was doing Ebner a good turn. But that frightened little brute, scared as hell she was – '

'I can quite well understand.'

Watching the eastern sky von List wondered if he would ever see the dawn of a day that would not tremble with gunfire.

'Give me your honest opinion, Tomas. Among the men of this battalion, have we the Ebners and the Katers?'

The Sergeant-Major thought for a moment.

'A lot of the N.C.O.s, most of them in fact, are the old type, but the young soldiers we're getting now – well, they're digging pretty low in the barrel, sir. Not that a few of them might not make fair enough soldiers, if they live long enough that is. Captain Ziegler's got the best of the last lot. Talking of Ebner and his cat,' he went on, blowing into his cupped hands, 'there's another joker in Sergeant Telling's platoon, he's gone and picked up a dirty little mongrel from somewhere. Won't hardly let it out of his sight. Company Sergeant-Major Weber was talking to me about it the other day,' he added meaningly.

'Do I gather he doesn't care for the dog?'

'Well, yes, sir. But Captain Ziegler's like you. He lets young Kalbach hang on to it.' Tomas spoke in his paternal, reproving tone reserved for well-liked but altogether impossible officers.

'Kalbach's one of the children, I presume?'

Tomas grinned.

'Hardly out of nappies, sir. Telling's got quite a gang of them.'

'I imagine if anyone can deal with a kindergarten it's Sergeant Telling.'

'One of the best we've got.' Tomas glanced suspiciously at the sky. 'It's beginning to get light, sir. Shouldn't we be moving?' Would there ever come a time when someone wasn't urging him to move somewhere, thought von List wearily. He would have enjoyed watching the dawn, for he loved mountains with the passion that some men felt for the sea.

'If you're going on to see the positions, sir – '

Tomas was like this every morning. An enormous nanny fussing about a venturesome child. Someone had to look after him, thought Tomas.

'There's plenty of mist about,' said von List soothingly.

'It can clear pretty damned quick, especially with a bit of wind. If they catch you on that forward slope in the open we'll be

indenting for a new C.O.' *They*. The mythical they lurking beyond the hill. British. French. Russian. Pole. They. Out of sight they were a dark threat, a deadly menace, ever-present; at close quarters they became men; no worse, no better, equally frightened, equally savage. Perhaps one day *they* would become men who came forward not with bomb and bayonet but with outstretched hands. He sighed and got to his feet, holding his side.

'I'd be grateful if you didn't go quite so fast,' he suggested. 'I'm not in training for these hills.' He never would be; he knew that. Not with this infernal pain nipping at his side.

Sergeant-Major Tomas turned and led the way up the track into the clouds hanging low over Monte Colle.

One of Colonel von List's first directives had been that the observation and machine-gun posts on the forward slopes were to be occupied on the fewest possible occasions and for the shortest possible length of time. The fewer men exposed to the shell-fire the better. He also ordered that those on sentry during daylight should remain at their posts until darkness; this was sensible, but unpopular among the men, who preferred on the whole to take their chance in the worm-runs rather than stay imprisoned for some nine and a half hours in the cramped discomfort of the cement coffins, as they called them. Loud and angry were the comments that rang round the rear bunkers. It was Sergeant Telling who pointed out that possibly the little Colonel was merely trying to save their lives. 'But not our bladders, Sergeant!' It was of course especially tedious for those with weak bladders or any pressing internal trouble, not being able to get into the open.

But at least there were two of them, so that while one watched, reporting hourly to Company Headquarters on the field telephone (the lines of which were mended on an average six times each week), his companion dozed on the little wooden seat, or read, or searched for lice, or, in the case of Private Kalbach, wrote things in a diary.

'You'll cop it one of these days,' said Private Kumitsch.

'Why, it's quite harmless. I don't fill it with defeatist thoughts or anything. As a matter of fact I'm writing about Trudi at the moment.' He sat chewing the pencil. 'I hope Maulhard remembers her biscuit.'

Kumitsch peered through the Spandau slit. Although dawn had broken the mist still swirled thickly, blotting out the valley and the lower hills where the enemy lay hidden.

'A real Black Forest mist,' he said. He came from Mannheim; Kalbach from further south, from a little village near Freiburg, in the heart of the Forest.

'I'll see it when I get home,' Kalbach said, writing busily . . . Still no letter from Marielena. Perhaps today. My God, I do miss her . . . He began to chew the pencil again, struck by a sudden

thought. She may not be able to write; perhaps she's never learnt how to. Kalbach sat with his eyes shut, thinking of his girl in Bologna. There was bound to be leave before too long, surely. The front was quiet. None of the old stagers seemed to think the British would attack before the spring . . . Must see her soon or . . .

'Psst, what's that?' Kumitsch pressed his face close to the slit. There it was again. The clink of boots on stone. Any number of men could have approached unseen through this swirling muck. Slowly he pulled the anti-grenade wire across the gun-slits.

'I don't hear anything,' said Kalbach.

'Shut up!'

This time Kalbach heard the rattle of the scree. He reached for his rifle, gazing as if hypnotised at the small steel hatch. A loud tapping on the steel made him jump like a frightened rabbit. Kumitsch had his finger to his lips.

'Sauer,' he challenged softly.

'Bacon,' came the answer, equally softly, then, 'Open up. It's cold out here.'

Kumitsch's eyes widened.

'It's the C.O.' he whispered. 'Well, go on, Ernst, open it!'

The Colonel's heavy ski-ing boots entered first, followed by the camouflage trousers, then the Russian quilted coat with the dark rent across the stomach. A thick polo-necked sweater concealed the Knight's Cross and the wine-red scarf brought a touch of colour to the drab efficiency of von List's battle clothes. Binoculars hung on his chest and the holster of his Lüger was strapped to his upper thigh.

'Good morning,' he said with a pleasant smile. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you. All right, relax, we're not on a parade ground.' The two young soldiers unstiffened themselves, smiling in return.

'What would you have done if I'd answered "Kraut"?' He removed the battered officer's cap and ran his fingers through the dark, dry hair.

'Said a prayer and wondered how to keep them out, Herr Oberst,' was Kumitsch's prompt reply. For a moment the Colonel regarded him thoughtfully, then he laughed. That was the sort of remark he appreciated.

'Are you Kumitsch?' he asked.

'Yessir. Heinrich Kumitsch. Number One Platoon, Number One Company of the First Battalion, Sixty-Eighth Grenadier Regiment – '

'Yes,' interrupted von List kindly, 'I know the rest. And you're Kalbach?'

'Ernst Kalbach, sir. Number One Platoon, Number One – ' A couple of keen young parrots, thought von List as Kalbach went right through the list, right up to Forty-Ninth Grenadier Divi-

sion. He sat down on the little wooden seat. There was just room for three in the cement coffin, provided no one wanted to dance.

'Would the Herr Oberst perhaps like some coffee?' asked Kumitsch.

'Thank you. But only if you've enough to spare.'

Kalbach, taking the opportunity to hide the diary in his pocket, got out the coffee and the alcohol burner from the small wooden cupboard. While Kalbach brewed the coffee, von List looked out from one of the loopholes.

The mists had cleared except for a few stubborn white lakes hanging in the valley round the ruins of Casaglia; and the tiled roof of Casa del More stuck up through the mist like a small red toy nestling in a bed of cotton-wool. A thin sun struck pale flame from the few scattered patches of winter oak and chestnut. There was no snow on the enemy-held hills of Points 613 and 721. Through his glasses he could see far down the long valley of the Setta, to the shining snow-peaks of the southern Apennines. Nothing moved on the road nor on the dead railway; the only sign of movement was the sudden glint of the early sun on the winding river. Nothing moved, for the enemy knew only too well how much could be seen from the brooding heights of Monte Colle; they knew that the flash of sunlight off a wind-screen or a trail of rising dust would bring the well-aimed shells of the eighty-eights.

There should be peasants moving among the little houses, he thought; ox-carts slowly creaking along the twisting mountain roads; the sounds of song and laughter, and of birds. Without such things all this beauty and grandeur was as dead as a painted backcloth.

He came back to the closer hills, clustered below the mountain like lurking pygmies waiting the first chance to destroy the giant that had been making their lives a burden for so long; the hills that held his immediate, more personal enemies. Suddenly he said,

'Do you see anything, Kumitsch?'

Kumitsch wiped the eye-pieces of his glasses and swung them in slow traverses across the scrubby hills before answering.

'No, Herr Oberst.'

'Casaglia – ruins just beyond – one finger right, clump of rocks shaped like a – '

'Yes, I see it, sir,' Kumitsch cried excitedly. 'A man's face. He's turning it now. There are two of them. In a slit trench. Look, one of them's getting out!'

Von List saw the little figure stretching itself and stamping its feet.

'He's cold,' said Kumitsch. 'He's been on sentry and he's cold.'

'Think you could hit him from here?'

Kumitsch considered the range. Must be nearly eight hundred.

No wind; light not too bad.

'I might, sir,' he answered carefully. 'But not with the first burst, and he wouldn't wait for any more. No, it's too far to be sure. D'you want me to try, sir?'

'No. Sergeant Telling says you're a good machine-gunner. If you don't think you can hit them, then don't fire.'

'I could have a go,' tried Kumitsch wistfully. He'd never fired his Spandau at a real, live target.

'No, Kumitsch, not today.'

'As the Herr Oberst says.'

But over in the right hand positions, in Spandau Post Four, the gunner had also picked up the target.

'What about it? Shall I liven up the bastards?' He was bored and itchy fingered. 'Give 'em a burst,' urged the number two. 'Teach them to jump about in the open like that.'

'Here goes then.' The gunner squeezed off a long burst, the hot cartridge cases clattering on the cement floor. 'That'll fix them!'

* * *

The tracer streaked among the crackling bullets high above the two startled British soldiers as they dived headlong into the trench in a welter of arms, legs and loud oaths.

'Flickin' 'ell! Where did that lot come from?' they asked each other as they got themselves sorted out, keeping well down behind the parapet of stones and tree-trunks while the bullets searched lower, shining from the rocky hill-side and sending the splinters leaping from the shattered tree-stumps. Feeling secure with the mountain blanketed round its upper slopes by the dawn clouds, they had ventured into the open to stretch their cramped legs.

'Get on to platoon headquarters, Jock, and tell them there's some crazy basket pretending the war's still going on!'

Jock twirled the handle of the field telephone and spoke forcefully into the receiver.

Some minutes later their Company Commander spoke urgently to his gunner observation officer who in turn had a quick word to his battery commander a few miles back, not far from the bank of the glinting river.

'I'm afraid we weren't able to spot the exact position,' said the Company Commander to the Observation Officer. 'But they're so damned well hidden it's almost impossible.'

'We're putting the Regiment on to the forward slope just below the cloud-line,' replied the O.O. happily. 'A hundred and forty-four shells,' he added, even more happily.

'With the machine guns and mortars to thicken the mixture,' said the Company Commander.

Well content with their preparations, the two officers got ready to enjoy the spectacle.

* * *

'What bloody fool did that?' Von List's mouth tightened with anger. More tracer bounced ineffectively among the rocks of Point 721 like sparks off an anvil. Number Three Platoon, thought Kumitsch, but he said nothing.

'We're going to need something stronger than coffee,' remarked the Colonel, already watching for the pale, daylight flash of the British guns. But he only heard them open fire, for the batteries were masked by the hills. A ragged grumble of sound as twenty-four guns fired almost as one.

'Hold on!'

The mountain face seemed to break into a million pieces as the shells arrived, followed by others so quickly that the guns themselves were inaudible in the screech and roar of the bombardment. The little concrete coffin leapt and shook; smoke and dust swept through loopholes, lit by the yellow cordite flashes. The flat, tearing crump of mortar bombs swelled the vicious symphony of death that came ripping at the mountain from the clear morning sky. Red-hot slivers of steel and jagged fragments of rock sang horribly through the shrill howl of the shells.

'Get down, Kumitsch!' Von List's shouted order was swallowed in the hellish uproar. He seized him by the shoulder. 'Down! And get the gun out of it!'

'But, sir. They may be following the barrage! They may – '

The Colonel dragged him away from the slit, pulled down the gun on to the floor. A splinter big as a saucer tore through the slit where Kumitsch's face had been, crashing into the little cupboard. Kumitsch found he was shaking. Crouching in one corner, with his hands pressed to his sweating face, Kalbach moaned and squirmed, trying to force his cringing body into the very concrete itself. A thin brown thread of coffee poured from the shattered cupboard. Von List squatted on his heels, catching the grains in his cap while the rain of shrieking destruction searched the mountain-side for the impertinent and incautious machine-gun that had dared to disturb the peace of the morning.

The steel hatchway took the full force of a shell-burst a few feet away with the iron clang of a forge. Kalbach's hands had fallen from his face and his mouth hung slackly open, dribbling saliva. His friendly brown eyes were glazed. Kumitsch's face had become suddenly incredibly thin so that the bones were forcing their way through the tight skin; his mouth was clamped shut; by the expression in his eyes he might have been praying. He watched his Colonel catching coffee in his cap. Doesn't he mind this hell? Doesn't he want to hide himself? To run from the noise and the smoke and these filthy, rending splinters? Yet he

sits there calmly collecting spilt coffee as if he was on a picnic. No wonder he wears the Knight's Cross.

Von List watched the small mounting pile of grains, thanking God he had something to occupy him, his stomach contracting horribly as the shells crashed into the mountain, hoping that Kumitsch had not noticed the shaking of the cap. Thousands of shells had been flung at him since 1939 and every one of them had taken its own toll of his nerves, so that now he sat silently screaming for a halt to this avalanche engulfing them.

'It'll soon be over,' he called strongly, his voice full of encouragement. Kumitsch nodded with an attempt at a smile; Kalbach gave no sign of having heard.

Then, as though Colonel von List did indeed hold the secrets of heaven and earth, the shelling stopped, like a summer thunderstorm that passes as suddenly as it began. The last lumps of earth pattered down and there was silence broken by Kalbach's snoring gasps of breath.

'Now we'll have that coffee, Kalbach. Kalbach! Did you hear what I said?' Von List stood up. He was very pale.

'Come on, Ernst,' said Kumitsch. 'You heard the Herr Oberst.' He went over and shook his friend. Moving as a man in a dream, Kalbach slowly investigated the wrecked cupboard. The splinter was embedded right through the tin but the mugs were untouched. Concentrating on the lighting of the burner, the shaking Kalbach pulled himself together.

'You've nothing to be ashamed of,' said von List. 'Even Generals shake. Look.' He held out his hands which were trembling slightly. 'You're in good company, Ernst.' Kumitsch replaced the gun. Here and there wispy smoke drifted on the breeze that came from the direction of the enemy; the air still reeked with explosive.

They drank the weak brown water masquerading as coffee.

'Was that your first time, Kalbach?'

'No, Herr Oberst. There've been others.' He answered very slowly, almost stammering. 'It's not only the shells. It's – it's being cooped up like this and – '

'You want to get out and run, is that it?' Von List spoke as though he was genuinely interested in the reactions of a young recruit. Which he was.

'Well, yes, Herr Oberst.' Kalbach was recovering himself; the rim of the mug was not banging quite so loudly against his teeth.

'But you won't, will you?'

'Of course he won't, sir,' said Kumitsch firmly. 'He's far too lazy to run anywhere.' Kalbach joined shakily in the little gust of laughter.

'Tell me,' said von List to Kumitsch. 'What will you do after the war?'

'I want to be an architect,' he said promptly.

'Like Captain Ziegler.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You've chosen a sensible profession. There'll be plenty of work for architects by the time this is all over. Have you done any training?'

'No, sir. I was called up.'

'And now you're a good machine-gunner instead of a budding architect. Perhaps after today you may even be a better one, now that you've seen what a few badly aimed shots can do. And you, Kalbach?'

Kalbach refilled the Colonel's mug before answering. 'I don't know, Herr Oberst. I thought perhaps I'd like to be a vet.' So ashamed was he of his performance under shell-fire that Private Kalbach found difficulty in meeting anyone's eye.

'You're the one with the dog, aren't you?'

Kalbach nodded cautiously.

'What d'you call her?'

'Trudi, Herr Oberst.'

Kalbach was getting anxious. Major Holmers had allowed Trudi on the strength of the company. But the Colonel might not be so accommodating.

'And when you're on duty, what happens to Trudi then?'

'Private Maulhard looks after her, Herr Oberst. She stays in the platoon bunker.'

'I see.'

Von List emptied the coffee grounds into a mug and put on his cap.

'Thank you,' he said courteously. 'The coffee was most refreshing.'

He took a quick look out. Nothing stirred in the weak sunlight; the hills opposite could have been utterly empty. Far away down the Setta valley shells from an eighty-eight chased an unwary truck, finally catching it just before it reached the safety of a bend. He watched the column of black smoke without any particular pleasure. It was very clear, and they'd be watching the whole slope like hawks.

'It looks as if I'm in for a long crawl,' he said. 'Let's hope the worm-run hasn't been too badly knocked about. Oh, and by the way, Kumitsch, it'll pay you to remember that when I give an order I expect it to be obeyed at once. In war there is usually no time for argument, anyway not until the moment has passed.'

As always the Colonel spoke quietly but nevertheless Private Kumitsch found his words almost as terrifying as the shells. Von List smiled.

'Far better for the coffee tin to be cut in half rather than your face.' As he spoke, a fresh batch of mortar bombs whistled down, bursting along to their right: the sneaky second lot to catch the

careless, the unwary, the over-confident, or those who'd come out to pick up the bits.

'Stretcher!' called a muffled voice, rising in pitch as it shouted again.

In one stride von List was at the field telephone.

'Ziegler? Commanding Officer here. Number Four post has been hit, they're calling for a stretcher. Get on to the mortars double quick and tell them I want smoke for at least a quarter of an hour. Yes, of course I'm all right. Don't ask damn-fool questions and get on with it. Wait till the smoke thickens, then get them out of it. I'll join the stretcher party at Post Four. Got it?' He waited, hitting his fist against open palm while the cries of the wounded man grew more and more desperate.

After what seemed to be hours the German mortars fired from the deep gully, where they lurked in emplacements hacked from the rock. The bombs made a loud hiss as they fell into the valley between the lines to burst in long streamers of phosphorus. Smoke billowed out in heavy white clouds, drifting at once on the breeze towards Monte Colle. Within a moment it was creeping through the loopholes, making them cough and brush at their eyes.

'Stretcher!' came the thin wail. 'Number Four Post, stretcher!' When the smoke was as dense as a December fog Colonel von List let himself out of Spandau Post Six and made his way as quickly as he could towards the cries for help, holding his scarf across his nose and mouth.

Now and then an explosion tore apart the smoke as the enemy lopped over scattered bombs into the seething white cauldron.

'I hope to hell he makes it,' said Kumitsch fervently.

'My God, I'll be glad when today's over and we can get back out of this,' said Kalbach equally fervently.

The story of how their new Colonel had appeared like a ghost out of the smoke and helped to carry the armless Wenkhe and the jumbled remains of Adler from Spandau Post Four soon spread among the rank and file of the battalion. Voices were heard saying cautiously that the small Colonel with the scarred face 'wasn't doing too badly so far'. They liked the bit about the coffee grounds too. That probably did more for his reputation than the cold glint of his Knight's Cross. But the old stagers, sceptics to a man, muttered, 'We'll wait and see.'

His three Company Commanders stood expectantly before him, having no idea why the Colonel wished to see them. Ziegler with his cap at its usual devil-may-care angle and the usual look of cool unconcern in his eyes; Simmering, fidgeting slightly with his map-case; and Roske, the youngest of the three, very sturdy in his wrinkled, dirty jack-boots. Major Holmers, leaning, as was

his fashion, against the wall of the Orderly Room, scraped out his pipe and watched von List as the latter looked the three officers up and down, slowly, hardly moving his head. Simmering cleared his throat. Somewhere in the distance an artillery duel was going on in a lazy sort of way.

'How many times have you been wounded, Captain Ziegler?'

'Three, sir.'

'Captain Simmering?'

'The same, Herr Oberst.' He was a thin, sandy-haired man with restless, greyish eyes.

'I see. And you, Lieutenant?'

'I'm afraid only once, Herr Oberst,' said Roske with a grin.

'I'm glad the fact amuses you,' said von List coldly. They all looked at each other in the silence, not knowing at all where this was leading. No more grinning, warned Ziegler with a frown and a little shake of the head.

'And a lot of the men in your companies have been hit more than once. Isn't that so, gentlemen?'

'Sergeant Telling has the wound badge in gold,' said Ziegler. And that meant four wounds or more.

'Exactly.'

'I've got three golds in my company,' said Captain Simmering, hoping he was on the right track.

Von List hit the table with his hand so that the ink-pots jumped.

'Yet it was a man of your company who was responsible for that bit of bloody stupidity this morning.' His voice had risen slightly. Simmering went very red.

'Two men dead. And why? Because some damned young lout took it into his head to loose off a lot of completely useless machine-gun bullets.'

'They have orders to fire on their own initiative, sir,' pointed out Captain Ziegler mildly.

'Of course they damned well have. But not at targets miles out of range. I was there, Captain Ziegler. I saw the whole miserable performance. Two dead! I won't have the lives of men under my command thrown away like that. If they have to die then for God's sake let it be for something that may help us to win this bloody war. You're experienced soldiers. Get hold of them! It's your job. If you can't teach these boys to be soldiers then you shouldn't be wearing officer's uniform – please, Captain Ziegler, I haven't finished. I don't want any repetition of this performance. Is that clear?' They nodded. Lieutenant Roske was no longer grinning. Reinhard never spoke to them like this, thought Holmers, slowly filling his pipe. He was far too much the loud-mouthed, hit-them-with-everything commander. But this new young colonel was handling them all right. Provided he doesn't push Ziegler too far.

'From now on,' said von List, underlining each word, 'we hoard our men, and our weapons, for when they can do the most damage. We conserve our strength for the moment it's really needed. And believe me, that moment will come.' He paused. Holmers' match sputtered and they heard him puffing hard at his clogged pipe.

'Above all we keep our forward positions hidden. We don't skulk, but on the other hand we stay quiet until we can make sure that every bullet kills, wounds or badly frightens an enemy soldier.' He allowed them to think about all this for a moment, then got to his feet.

'And now I suggest that as it's a quiet evening and if you can spare half an hour you join me in the mess where we can drink some of the Quartermaster's comforting alcohol and chat of more pleasant things.' The quick, warm smile brought his whole face to sudden life.

6

THE railway from Florence to Bologna passes through many tunnels on its winding way among the last of the mountains. Not for months had any train rattled along the rusting lines; the sleepers had gone to build bunkers and dug-outs or to keep the armies warm, and the tunnels were used by both sides as supply dumps, covered approaches or hiding places where guns lurked, popping out to fire a few rounds, then retiring to safety before the retaliation had time to arrive.

These tunnels were filled with men, animals, ammunition, petrol – all the expendable material of war; they echoed to the roar of engines, the loud voices of men knowing they were safe, like badgers or rats deep in the earth.

In a short tunnel some eight hundred yards behind Rocca San Michele the First Battalion had its rest area. The southern entrance was screened from enemy eyes by Monte Colle and hung at night with thick sacking just within the mouth. From no possible angle could a British gun slap a shell into the entrance. In there the men could relax, shout and laugh as loud as they pleased or sleep the short hours away on the crackling straw mattresses provided from somewhere by Quartermaster Sauer. A fortnight in the line, forty-eight hours in the tunnel: that was the average routine, unless of course there was an alert, when the mountain was fully manned. But that morning the tunnel was occupied by Number One Company, lounging with their boots

off in a heavy cloud of tobacco smoke. Some slept still, for Ziegler ordered no official reveillé on the first morning; a few lay luxuriously with arms under their heads, gazing up at the damp arch of the roof, wondering whether to shave or whether to turn over and go back to sleep.

Toes wiggled contentedly in the warmth built up by eighty-six bodies, and the stink of oil lamps struggled against that of unwashed socks. Here and there a man cleaned his rifle lazily or scraped the mud from his boots. At this moment the front-line was a hundred miles away and death forgotten. Tomorrow was another day, in another world – at the moment we revel in stretching our limbs and thinking of nothing except sleep, food, schnapps.

But some were thinking of more disturbing things. For when the company had reached the tunnel they had found mail waiting. Or rather, some had.

'All this bloody travelling, all over the bloody world, what's it done for me?' Out of all the battalion, with the exception of Sergeant Telling, Corporal Hufnagel was the only one who had seen the snow-peaks of the Caucasus.

'Lost me the best lay between Berlin and Paris. Get her down beside you after a skinful of schnapps and – ' His imagination stifled him, and he sat glaring about him with stricken, angry eyes. 'What could have made her do such a thing?' he asked. 'And for a bloody pork butcher too, not even a soldier.' Hufnagel poked savagely at the bit of sausage he was heating over the lamp, chasing it relentlessly round his mess-tin as he imagined the great greasy hands of the butcher pleasuring themselves all over the secret places of Elfrida's plump, white body. He ground his long, yellow teeth.

'Did you expect her to wait?' asked Corporal Wiederheim. 'The butcher was there, you weren't – and he brought his sausage with him, yards of it.' He laughed coarsely.

'You don't have to worry, Hufnagel,' advised Sergeant Telling from where he lay propped up on one elbow. 'Women are like shells, when one's gone off, there are plenty more coming. Bigger and better ones, all longing to explode.' His eye gleamed. A little group of his platoon sat or lay round the lamp: Hufnagel, Wiederheim, a few of the children: Damme and Wedderkop; Maulhard, Kumitsch and Kalbach. Kumitsch was already stripping his Spandau, using the oily rag lovingly on the dull steel. If he'd got a letter like that, he thought, he wouldn't have made it public. Hufnagel can't have loved her much, he decided with all the certainty of eighteen years.

'There is no load heavier than a light woman,' said Wedderkop in his quoting voice.

'Hear that, Hufnagel?' Wiederheim looked up from his inspection of his remarkably dirty feet. 'That's what our tame

poet thinks. Did you make it up, Wedderkop? Just came to you, did it? All inspiration and daisies in the bloody meadow?' He picked happily between his knotted toes.

'Goethe,' said Wedderkop quietly. 'The greatest poet Germany ever produced.'

'And I'm the greatest corporal Germany ever produced,' shouted Hufnagel scornfully. 'Am I hell!' He made a very loud rude noise.

'No names, no sweat,' said Wiederheim, 'and not mentioning anyone in particular I can think of at least one corporal in Germany who's made it better than – '

'Right, all you scruffy layabouts, off your fat backsides and get your weapons cleaned!' Paying no attention to the chorus of groans and complaints that greeted him on all sides, Company Sergeant-Major Weber made his way along the tunnel roaring out the order.

'Weapon inspection in an hour. Get them moving, Platoon Sergeants! Telling! Blaun! Krause! Come on then. I want to see the company shaved and at least pretending to be soldiers by the time I get back.'

'Why not a drill parade and a sodding brass band?' suggested someone anonymously from Sergeant Blaun's platoon.

'Right, that'll do, lad. Get hold of them, Blaun!'

C.S.M. Weber stalked from the tunnel.

'Of all the bloody liberties! . . . What the hell are they playing at? . . . Weapon inspection! Shaved by eleven o'clock on the first morning out of the line! . . . Outrage . . . Ziegler's gone off his bloody nut' . . . and so on. Slowly the three sergeants got their angry platoons under some sort of control, by a mixture of shouting, bullying and encouraging.

'It's not Captain Ziegler,' said Runz, who always attached himself to his friends in Number One Platoon whenever the Company was out of the line. In that way he was able to enjoy the company of Wedderkop, whom he admired greatly as an intellectual, and also, now and then, to scrounge an extra go of rations. 'He went off to spend the night at Battalion Headquarters.'

'He's right,' agreed Hufnagel, putting the erring Elfrida from his mind. 'This smacks of friend Dobermann.' He got his shaving gear from his pack. 'Hey, Kalbach, put down that damned dog and get the hot water!'

But the dog went with her master as he made his way along to where the Company cooks had their field kitchen set up beneath a thick screen of camouflage nets at the northern entrance.

'Here!' One of the cooks threw a scrap of blood sausage to the little brown mongrel sitting by Kalbach's boots. Nervously she retrieved it.

'How's Trudi?' called a voice as Kalbach made his way back

to the platoon bearing the heavy dixie of hot water. 'Had her out on patrol yet?'

'Teach her to sniff out the Tommies,' called someone else. The dog was a great favourite in the Company, with her small soft ears and the black patch round one eye. Fraulein Telling, she was called by some.

'About time too,' said Hufnagel. Stripped to the waist he looked like some small grizzly bear. 'Oh, yes, that Dobermann's a madman all right. Don't worry, I've met plenty like him. I remember a lieutenant we had in the Crimea. Just the same. Had us all running round playing organised games and stamping our boots.' He tried to work the hopelessly thin soap into some sort of a lather.

'The very picture of young German manhood,' said Wiederheim, squinting down the barrel of his Schmeisser. 'It's a privilege to serve under him.'

'There's more to soldiering than damaging your feet on concrete and saluting a bunch of nitwits. Christ, this bloody stomach of mine.' Hufnagel grimaced into the bit of broken mirror.

'Shouldn't stuff yourself with all that sausage and schnapps,' growled Sergeant Telling, scraping painfully at the stubble on his square chin.

'Better join one of the special Stomach Battalions, Hufnagel. They feed you on noodles and milk.' This suggestion was greeted with a roar of laughter.

'They're not all nitwits,' said Kumitsch when the hilarity caused by the thought of Corporal Hufnagel's unfortunate inside had died down.

'So they aren't, aren't they, snot-nose? Now you've made me slit my bloody throat,' he bellowed, waving his razor about.

'The new commanding officer for instance,' said Kumitsch, sticking bravely to his guns. 'Yes, he's all right,' echoed his friend, Kalbach.

'Ritterkreuz merchant,' interrupted Sergeant Blaun contemptously. He had come across to see Telling. 'Death or glory. We've seen 'em, haven't we, Hellmut?' Telling nodded. Blaun had a long narrow face, a horse-face with big, dirty teeth and a permanently discontented expression, in great contrast to the other sergeant whose face was square and high-cheek-boned, with the look of the Slav to him.

' "Think offensively!" ' He quoted from von List's directive to all members of the First Battalion. 'Stir up a bloody hornet's nest at this stage of the war! Does he think we're crazy or what? "We must show the enemy we not only have weapons, but that we can use them!" ' No one took Blaun's grumbling very seriously. No live-and-let-live fellow was Sergeant Blaun.

'He'll be feeding us stuff about Greater Germany next.'

'Perhaps it's what we need,' said Kumitsch as an aside to his friend, Kalbach. The latter, noticing Blaun's expression, very wisely concentrated on rubbing Trudi's ears.

'I don't want any whining little recruit fresh out of school telling me what I need.' Blaun clenched his fists.

'I'm sorry, Sergeant, but his behaviour the other day when we were being badly shelled was – I thought it was splendid,' he said defiantly. Kumitsch flushed as he felt all eyes on him. 'Yes,' echoed Kalbach. 'It was.'

'How touching,' said Blaun.

'Come on,' advised Corporal Wiederheim peaceably. 'The lad's right, Sergeant. As officers go this one's all right. We could have done worse. At least he knows what war's all about.'

'As long as he doesn't get us mixed up in some bloody last ditch stand,' said Blaun. 'I've had a bellyful of them.' When he turned to Kumitsch he spoke kindly enough, for all his glowering expression.

'What's a bloke like you, all lah-di-dah talk, doing as a bloody private? Keep at it, boy, and you'll wind up with a star on your shoulder.'

'I'm quite happy where I am, Sergeant.' Kumitsch had a nice smile. That was one thing about both Blaun and Telling, they knew good material when they saw it; they could tell the genuine from the phoney, and smell out rats quicker than most. Like Captain Ziegler, they knew exactly how to handle men, and that's what made Number One the best Company in the battalion, even with all these schoolboys blundering about the place.

'Break up the coffee-housing,' ordered Sergeant Telling. 'If those guns aren't properly cleaned, I'll have your guts stewing in a mess-tin. If Dobermann can find so much as a bit of fluff, I'll put that man on double go of sentry when we get back up the hill.' Because their morale was high at that moment and they were in the tunnel for another thirty-six hours, the men worked away contentedly at their rifles and mortars and light machine guns, amid much lighthearted chatter.

'So we've got the Guards against us,' said Runz casually when he thought sufficient people might be listening. That was one advantage to working in Company Headquarters, you picked up any titbits before the latrine-rumour-mongers had got busy. Ears were pricked up.

'Been talking to Kesselring, have we?' Wiederheim worked the bolt back and forth.

'The Company Commander mentioned it to Lieutenant Dobermann,' said Runz.

'And you happened to have your great red ear jammed to the keyhole.'

'I've got an uncle who fought against the English Guards in the last war,' piped Private Maulhard. But no-one listened to

Maulhard. For one thing he looked like an anaemic rabbit; for another he had the same name as the Chaplain. People were always making remarks about Holy Joe and 'get into your bloody pulpit'.

'What's so special about them? They'll stop a bullet just as hard as all of us.'

'Are they all over six foot three?' asked Kalbach. 'I read somewhere – '

'You can keep their sodding Guards,' said Wiederheim. 'The New Zealanders are the worst. I've fought them in Africa and at Cassino and I'm telling you – '

'Anyone who's tangled with the Gurkhas will know you're talking a load of balls,' shouted across a soldier from Number Three Platoon. 'Why, at the Coriano Ridge, they sliced off heads neat as scything thistles. Proper little devils they are.'

Each had his own idea.

'When they're off on their reminiscences, none of them pay the slightest attention to anyone else,' observed Kumitsch quietly to Kalbach.

'It makes one feel a bit of a fool though,' said Kalbach, who would like to have been able to join in.

'Why? Because we haven't spent our lives killing people?'

'I can't quite explain,' said Kalbach lamely.

'One thing,' shouted Sergeant Telling above the rising din, 'they were the only ones to get out of Tobruk in good order.'

'What's all the fuss about?' Sergeant Blaun shouted even louder. 'Have you forgotten the Russkis, Hellmut? They'd wipe the floor with these gentleman soldiers you're all bawling about. New Zealanders! Scotsmen! Indians! Guardsmen! I'd like to see them stopping an Ivan attack at thirty below zero! Remember the Tartar Wall, Hellmut?' They were off again. Telling and Blaun; joined the Wehrmacht on the same day; fought in Russia together; planned to go into the grocery business as partners after the war.

'If the British attack,' bellowed Hufnagel, Elfrida by now entirely out of his mind, 'then we'll get a chance to tumble these guardsmen of theirs back down the hill. Just you watch us.'

'They won't attack,' someone else yelled, determined to make himself heard. 'Not when they find out we've got a commanding officer with the Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds. They'll all be waving white flags.'

The noise was by now terrific and C.S.M. Weber had practically to blow a blood-vessel to make himself heard above the shouts and counter-shouts that rang through the tunnel.

'When you've all quite finished!' His practised roar cut through the din and brought silence.

'I can see it's time we got you up the hill again,' he snarled. 'Sergeant Telling! Sergeant Blaun! Sergeant Krause! Get your

platoons outside for weapon inspection. Any man improperly dressed I'll have on a charge so fast his feet won't bloody well touch the ground.'

Outside, under cover of a few scrubby oak-trees thickened by camouflage nets, Second Lieutenant Dobermann waited impatiently as the Company formed up, slapping his leg with the small cane he always affected. His china-blue eyes regarded the men with disfavour. Bunch of untidy oafs, he thought. By God, if this was my Company, I'd soon put some of the old smartness into them.

'Number One Company present and ready for your inspection, sir.' C.S.M. Weber remembered just in time and flung up his arm in the Nazi salute, now compulsory for the soldiers of Germany.

Dobermann started down the front rank, soon getting quite cross at being unable to find so much as a speck of dust on the weapons. Then he got to Kalbach and at once his eyes went even harder. Placing his hands on his hips the Lieutenant stood back.

'Since when was it customary for soldiers of the Wehrmacht to bring dogs on parade with them? Good gracious, Private Kalbach, it'll be elephants next.' If Dobermann expected to raise a laugh he was definitely disappointed; everywhere stony faces gazed blankly before them. He smacked his trouser with the cane.

'Sergeant-Major, remove that brute!'

Kalbach's face flamed and angry tears sprang to his eyes, but he did not venture to speak. Trudi, sitting quietly beside his toecaps, bared her teeth at Weber, bristling dangerously.

'Sergeant Telling,' ordered Weber loudly, 'remove it!'

She snarled warningly, pressing back against Kalbach's boots.

'Well, hurry up, man,' said Dobermann, noticing grins here and there.

'Wipe those smiles off your silly mugs!' The grins vanished.

'Corporal Hufnagel, get that animal out of it!' Sergeant Telling glared at the corporal. There was a sound from the rear rank that might almost have been a laugh.

'Jump to it, Hufnagel,' commanded Telling, thoroughly enjoying himself. The corporal advanced gingerly, making clucking sounds, to be met by louder snarls and the flash of small, sharp teeth.

'Go on, Trudi,' hissed Kalbach desperately. 'Go on!'

'Stop talking in the ranks,' screamed the irate Dobermann. 'Put that man on a charge!' But whether he meant Kalbach or Corporal Hufnagel no one seemed to know.

'Herr Leutnant,' said C.S.M. Weber in a low voice which was nevertheless heard by at least a dozen men. 'The Company Commander has always allowed the dog to parade with the men – '

'Good dog, good dog,' implored Corporal Hufnagel, clicking

his fingers and making an absolute ass of himself.

'Oh, to hell with it!' exclaimed Dobermann angrily.

Pretending to wash his hands of such a crazy outfit, the Second-in-Command of Number One Company carried on with the inspection, finding fault with almost every man, fuming and wondering how he should have coped. Behind him the little procession of N.C.O.s stopped and advanced like a small, shunting train, their faces stolidly impassive.

'She deserves the Oak Leaves,' whispered the man next to Private Kalbach. The little dog glanced up at her master and wagged her stumpy tail.

By now it was early December and still the long-expected attack had not materialised. There was heavy snow on the higher peaks and an inch or so in the valleys, but nothing to hamper a determined assault. The shells continued to fling up the earth and snow; the secretive mortar bombs continued to fall with their deadly whisper through the white nights, almost inaudible above the winter wind. Captain Buchner was kept busy with his needle and thread and Chaplain Maulhard appeared from Regimental Headquarters to give comfort to quite a number of Colonel von List's battalion sent to meet their God, rendered almost unrecognisable by high explosive. To many of the veterans, the cold that flayed their skins and filled the bunkers and alarm posts was horribly reminiscent of Russia.

But the British did not attack. There were of course many reasons for this hesitancy: the slow milking of the Allied armies to strengthen other more vital fronts – though to the men of the First Battalion and those facing them, their small sector of that particular front was the world – the fatigue and the slow dampening of that *élan* so vital to successful attack engendered by months of grinding pursuit of a skilful and stubborn enemy who made every mile a bloodstained crawl; and now the mountains, manned by units far from beaten. One of the reasons could possibly have been the attack on the ammunition dump by a patrol under Lieutenant Dobermann; that might well have been the small, final straw.

For some time the British had been methodically building up stocks of gun and mortar ammunition in preparation for the grim business of tackling Monte Colle. These dumps were located in various out-of-the-way places, some of them well in advance of their own lines. With great perseverance and patience they had been lugging heavy loads of mortar bombs through the snow-showers to the shell of a house standing by itself near the San Martino track.

With equal patience von List had been keeping a nightly eye on this performance, sending small patrols from the forward companies to observe the stumbling, panting ammunition car-

riers. When he judged the moment to be ripe he ordered Captain Ziegler to lay on a demolition party to blow the dump sky-high.

7

PRIVATE RUNZ was quite right: the Guards Brigade *had* moved into the line against them.

'Is that clear then, Charles? Your job is to protect the carrier party until they've finished the job and cleared out. Nothing more. Understood?'

'Yes,' said Second Lieutenant Mackenzie. 'But supposing we run into anything on the way?'

'Then you have a go of course. All I meant was you aren't to go looking for trouble. Don't look so disappointed, there'll be plenty more chances. It seems as if this damned war's going on for a long time yet.' Major Alan Lumsden smiled.

'And just bear in mind that those chaps over there aren't men to play about with.' He had fought the German Army in North Africa and along the hard, slogging road from Salerno to the foot of Monte Colle. 'This isn't an exercise on Salisbury Plain; there are no umpires.' He looked at the thin, eager face of Charles Mackenzie for a moment before going on. We'll be getting them in prams next.

'Now, who are you going to take with you?'

'Sergeant Taylor, Corporal Buchan, Macrae, Bryson . . .' They discussed the details of the patrol while outside a few small snowflakes fell from the leaden sky and the sentries of Lumsden's company watched the cloud thickening round the massive summit of the mountain looming above them.

* * *

'By this evening it may well be snowing hard,' said Captain Ziegler. 'This is going to make things pretty damned difficult for you.'

'We'll manage,' said Second-Lieutenant Dobermann confidently. He ran through his plan again, using his little cane to point out his route and probable dispositions on the model built of mud, twigs and tape.

'No wasting time. Get there, place the charges and get out.'

'Yes, Captain,' said Dobermann in his most superior voice.

'And don't forget you're responsible for the six men you've chosen.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'I want them back in one piece.'

'And if we should happen to meet the British?'

'Good God, Dobermann, you'll have to use your loaf,' exploded Ziegler. 'That's what you're an officer for, isn't it?'

'Yes, Captain.' The Lieutenant sounded taken aback. 'You can rely on me,' he added more forcefully.

'I just don't want you to forget that the first job of an officer is to think for the men under him,' Ziegler said more kindly, 'and not to carry on as if he's a private soldier with no worries except how to stay alive – or how to get himself a load of glory.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'This is not a Cadet School here, Dobermann.'

'No, Captain.'

'Good then, you'd better get on with your briefing. Oh, by the way, if I were you I shouldn't take Kalbach. He's not much good in the dark.'

'I'd planned to take Immerman,' said Dobermann.

'A wise choice.' Captain Ziegler wiped the shaving soap from round his ears, put on his tunic and sheepskin jerkin.

'If I'm needed, I'll be down at Battalion Headquarters. I leave everything in your capable hands, Dobermann.'

'Yes, Captain.' Dobermann's arm shot out. Ziegler touched his cap in answer and left the bunker, leaving his second-in-command to go through his plan for the night's programme yet again.

'As foolproof as anyone could make it,' he said to himself, smiling at the thought of action at last.

* * *

It was evening. The bad snowstorm expected by everyone had broken up into short showers shot with intervals of grey, twilight darkness. There was hardly any wind. Not bad patrolling weather.

Fourteen Guardsmen stood patiently waiting in the darkness; snow danced lightly round their coal blackened faces in a sudden gust of wind. Sergeant Taylor reported the patrol ready to move off.

'The carrier party will give you an hour to get into position then they'll move. They should be at the dump by 2030 hours and for God's sake don't go and shoot them up,' said Major Lumsden. Mackenzie's teeth gleamed in his black face.

'I'll try not to,' he said.

'Well, you'd better get moving then. Good luck, and I'll keep the rum warm.'

Now that there was no further excuse for lingering Ensign Mackenzie felt a sudden empty flutter of panic. He thought of a dozen questions he'd like to ask; all the vital points he was sure he'd left out of his briefing came flooding into his mind. Within a minute or two he'd be on his own as he had never been before

in all his short life. There'd be no one to ask, no one to turn to. Suddenly war did not seem quite such a gay adventure. But he gave his first order of the patrol in a calm, quiet voice:

'Right, follow me and remember what we practised.'

Major Lumsden watched the file of dark shapes as they vanished into the swirling snow, making for the lonely wilderness of No Man's Land.

When the last man was swallowed up by the grey murk he went back inside the leaking shell of the farm-house where he had his Headquarters.

Once upon a time an Italian family had lived in the Casa del More, a small pink house near the mountain hamlet of Casaglia on the path that ran among the oak trees to the neighbouring hamlet of San Martino. Then the war flooded into the little valley below the southern face of Monte Colle. But not being required for the German defensive line, the small pink house was left unmolested until one of the first British shells to fall in the valley blew away most of the red-tiled roof, brought down the two upper rooms in a welter of plaster and splintered wood, and tore the bodies of the cowering Italians into untidy lumps of butcher's flesh.

But the twenty men humping the mortar bombs into neat tiers in what had been the living-room knew nothing of all this; nor would they have greatly cared. All they wanted was to get the unwelcome job completed and themselves back to the safety of their own lines. For it was a sinister spot, and, even though a covering party lay round the house, this was no place to hang about with the snow falling and no one able to see a yard in front of his bloody face. So they heaved and stacked like fiends and finally started back the way they had come, moving fast behind their N.C.O.

* * *

It was Kumitsch who saw them first. He had always had exceptionally keen eyes and he spotted a sudden dark movement as the snow-shower began to thin. He nudged Immermann, nodding towards the track below them; Immermann touched Corporal Hufnagel who in turn alerted Dobermann. The officer's heart leapt with a fierce excitement. Caught them at it! What a stroke of luck. Thank God they'd stopped to watch before approaching the building just visible through the slackening snow. Five – six – eight . . . Dobermann watched as the figures gathered on the track, spacing themselves in a long file, shown up nicely by the searchlights playing on the snow-clouds beyond them. Dobermann's finger itched. Christ, what a target!

'Ready!' he hissed. 'No one to fire till my order!'

The whispered order passed along his six men as they eased

themselves forward into good firing positions. Kumitsch flicked the safety catch of Kalbach's rifle – this was no party for a Spandau – and ran his tongue round his dry lips.

The order to fire trembled in Dobermann's throat; his fingers curled and scratched at the snow in his effort to stay silent while the British soldiers stood like cattle simply crying out for ambush. But, remembering his orders, the frustrated Lieutenant ground his teeth and said nothing.

* * *

Not fifty yards away Ensign Mackenzie lay in the deep shadow of the small pink house, waiting until the carriers moved off down the path back to La Quercia. Give them five minutes to get clear, then he could follow. So far things had gone according to plan; the dump was full and nothing worse than a little wind and snow had come to disturb the night. But he'd be glad to get out of this place. There was a horrible feel to it: the feel of desolation, loneliness and death that prickles the hair and makes men look over their shoulders. He was very glad of his twelve companions.

'They're moving, sir,' whispered Corporal Buchan beside him. He too very much wanted to get away from this sinister spot. Something wasn't right. Like Sergeant Telling, the corporal had a highly developed instinct for war's little tricks.

'Shall I tell Sergeant Taylor?'

'Give them a moment yet.'

Sergeant Taylor lay in a little hollow the other side of the house kicking his frozen feet gently up and down. Another half hour and they'd be warm again. Carting ammunition into No Man's Land and piling it up seemed pretty crazy to him. Wonder Jerry hasn't blown the whole flicking lot into . . .

'Sergeant!' whispered a voice. 'We're to move. Mr Mackenzie will cover us from the house.'

'On your feet, you lot!' His seven men rose to their feet at his whisper, and formed up behind him on the track.

Ensign Mackenzie and the remainder of the patrol lay where they were; they saw the Sergeant's arm raised to signal advance and then the grey darkness burst into a sudden inferno of shots and yells.

* * *

Faced with this new target Lieutenant Dobermann could contain himself no longer.

'*Feuer!*' He yelled at the top of his voice, jumping to his feet as he did so. The rifle jerked in Kumitsch's hands as he fired; slamming home the bolt, he got off his second shot as the black targets, shocked for an instant into utter stillness, broke and ran in momentary panic, leaving three bodies in the snow. One, braver than the rest, turned, crouching, to fire back. The bullet

shattered a rock between Streicher and Kumitsch and went whining into the sky. Kumitsch felt a sharp slash of pain across his cheek, then the hot feel of blood on his skin.

'Come on!' Lieutenant Dobermann rushed forward down the short, white slope. 'Come on, we've got the bastards!'

From the corner of his eye Kumitsch saw the muzzle-flashes of fresh weapons firing from near the building.

'On the right, Herr Leutnant, the right!' Shouting and hurrahing, they followed their leader as he swung towards the house, blazing with his pistol.

'No grenades,' he roared. 'No grenades in the house!'

'Charge,' shouted Ensign Mackenzie in reply. He and his four men leapt to their feet and forward to meet the Germans. Kumitsch found himself shouting wildly as he loosed off his rifle at the little stabs of flame. Streicher was bowled over like a shot rabbit by a burst of tommy-gun fire, horribly smashed by the heavy bullets; somewhere in the confusion Dobermann was screaming encouragement: 'Let them have it! Give it to them!' An English voice shouted again and again for Sergeant Taylor to come in on the right, but Taylor was desperately getting the remnants of his ambushed party under control.

The two patrols were now involved in the maddened, animal chaos of close-quarter fighting in the dark. Curses, sudden wild bellows of rage and pain rose on all sides. Corporal Hufnagel's machine-pistol was knocked from his hands by a clubbed rifle; he closed with the man and they fell to the ground, fighting savagely with their teeth and hands, rolling to and fro in the snow.

'Damme! Wedderkop! To the house with me!' Hugging the pack of explosive, Dobermann ran for the black doorway of the building. Wedderkop leapt aside from a lunging bayonet, smashed at the panting face of the guardsman with the butt of his rifle, just as he'd learnt in training. His enemy fell back with a loud grunt of pain, spitting curses and broken teeth, and Wedderkop rushed after his officer. Private Damme lay trembling behind a rock where he had dropped when the bullets began to fly, sweating and moaning in fear, trying to find the courage to get up and help his comrades.

Kumitsch stood his ground as the figure came at him, not feeling the bullets as they ripped through the folds of the snow-smock, grazing his side in long, bloody streaks. He fired and missed, then the rifle was empty and he hurled it at the other man's head. Stunned by the blow across his forehead, Ensign Mackenzie staggered and clutched his face; before the officer had time to recover himself, Kumitsch was on him like a tiger. As his back hit the snow, he felt the German's hands at his throat. Blinded by blood from his split scalp and bemused by the blow Mackenzie could do little to defend himself. After a few frantic

efforts to loosen the steel fingers squeezing the life from his tortured lungs he lost consciousness. A voice was crying out, savage and exultant. Kumitsch suddenly realized it was his voice; he relaxed the killer grip and rose unsteadily to his feet, gasping and shaking his head.

The din of battle had ceased. A man was crying out in pain not far away. Otherwise the silence was amazing.

'Hot work,' said Corporal Hufnagel, replacing his trench knife in its scabbard. The whole front of his white smock was darkly stained. 'Now we've got to get out of here before all hell breaks loose. You all right, Kumitsch?'

'I think so, Corporal.' His face was a mask of blood, and it trickled in warm threads down his right thigh. The figure at their feet stirred and groaned.

'You've got yourself a prisoner, lad. Now all you've got to do is to take him home to Ziegler.' Hufnagel grinned wolfishly.

'Look out, they're coming again!' The Corporal whipped round towards the shrill cry of warning, the Schmeisser held ready.

'Watch it, Lieutenant,' he shouted. 'They're back!'

Private Damme had spotted the running figures from where he lay. Coming straight for him. Twisting up quickly he flung a stick grenade. Unfortunately it landed in a deeper drift and the muffled explosion only stopped Sergeant Taylor who was leading the counter-attack, blowing his legs to shreds. The remainder came on, howling like beasts.

Lieutenant Dobermann stood in the doorway bareheaded, firing his pistol, while behind him the eight minute fuse hissed and sputtered on its way to the explosive.

'Stop them! Kill them! Break them up!'

The vicious rattle of Hufnagel's Schmeisser, in the reddened hands of an expert, did just that. The wild little charge broke, collapsing into the snow or turning to run.

'Now get them out of it, Hufnagel! You've got four minutes.'

'We've got a prisoner, sir,' called Kumitsch excitedly.

'Well, take him along. Go on, clear out, all of you!'

'Immermann's wounded! It's his leg.'

'Leave him, you clods.'

'What about you, Lieutenant?' asked Hufnagel.

'I'll be along. God Almighty, man, didn't you hear what I said? GET THEM OUT OF IT!'

Dragging the dazed British officer with them the little party followed Corporal Hufnagel towards the far-off safety of their mountain. Dobermann ran back into the house to check the fuse was burning correctly . . . 'It is the sole responsibility of the officer i/c demolition to see that the charge is properly placed . . . and that the fuse does not misfunction at the last minute . . .' That's what they'd told him at Cadet School. That's what

he had to do now.

He could see the tiny red firework of the burning fuse. Can't be more than four minutes. Dobermann was sweating. But he forced himself to concentrate. Explosive. Primer. Detonator. Safety fuse correctly lit. Where's my steel helmet? To hell with that! Suddenly sick with panic he rushed outside.

'Herr Leutnant!' Oh, God, it was Immermann. 'You can't leave me, sir! Please, Herr Leutnant, you can't.' Immermann was dragging himself across the snow leaving a black trail. 'Please,' he kept repeating. 'Don't leave me.' Dobermann hesitated, glancing back at the doorway, then at the white mass of the mountain.

'Please!'

'Damn you for a clumsy swine, Immermann,' he said hoarsely as he ran to the crawling man. The soldier was a small man and Dobermann exceptionally powerful. He slung him over his shoulder and stumbled desperately for the shelter of a deep hollow just over the ridge where they had lain to watch the house.

As Dobermann flung the moaning Immermann to the ground and himself on top, the night split apart in a great red blast of flame and sound. Dobermann shielded his head with his arms as a searing hurricane swept above the hollow, laying flat the splintered remains of trees and lifting the snow in a driving white curtain. Chunks of masonry and timber hurtled through the air all round them and the huge roar of the explosion rumbled to and fro among the mountains, startling the sentries and waking the sleepers and bringing joy to the heart of Lieutenant Dobermann, who laughed shakily and said:

'Thank God. It worked,' half to himself, half to the semi-conscious Immermann.

To Sergeant Taylor, suffering terribly, and to the three other British wounded it brought instant extinction; to the small pink house it brought final destruction and to the dead sprawling in the blackened snow it meant nothing at all.

To the watchers on the mountain the whole landscape was frozen in the eerie, furnace light of an erupting volcano as the mighty flame of the explosion leapt across the night; the sound slammed among the hills and smashed hard against the eardrums of the two men ducking their heads against the sudden terrifying storm.

In the moment of utter, stunned silence that followed, Colonel von List said,

'He's done a good job.'

'Yes,' agreed Captain Ziegler, working his fingers in his ears. 'And now all he's got to do is to bring them home safely.' He listened intently, thinking he heard a faint cry from the valley,

from where they could see the smoke drifting against the searchlight clouds.

'There'll be casualties,' he said. 'I'll warn the Aid Post.'

'A lot of bullets were flying about down there. I hope to God he hasn't lost too many men. We need something to encourage the battalion, without having to dig a lot more graves. This may have surprised our friends across the way.' Von List laughed quite gaily, adding:

'Field-grey dummies to be put up and knocked down at their leisure, that's what they're beginning to think of us. But sometimes the coconut answers back, eh, Ziegler?'

But Captain Ziegler had gone back to his headquarters to prepare Buchner and his boys for the reception of casualties.

Like smoke-maddened hornets the British reacted savagely to the destruction of the dump. Guns and mortars of every calibre searched the lower slopes of Monte Colle and up and down the little dog-leg valley which ran between the mountain and Rommel Ridge.

As previously planned the patrol under Corporal Hufnagel cowered together in the shallow cave, pressing into the furthest corner to escape the deluge of shells landing all round. Earth and small lumps of rock fell from the trembling roof on to their huddled shapes; the shriek and flash of a close one had them burrowing and squirming like a shapeless mass of worms.

Kumitsch felt he was bathed in blood from his face to the soles of his boots, but clung on with both hands to his prisoner, determined to take him in. This won't last long, thought Hufnagel, then we'll get going, but not the valley, along the side of the mountain. The valley would be a bloody death-trap for the rest of the night. Dobermann will have gone up in that bang. Get 'em back, Hufnagel, and they might give you another bit of tin to wear on your best tunic. Someone started yelling curses, shrill like a woman.

'Cut it out, Damme!' The Corporal's angry bellow rose above the roar and crash outside. 'Oh, God,' cried Damme. 'Oh, God, make it stop!' God seemed to hear the wild plea, for the searching shells moved on, further along the valley.

It was then that they were joined by the exhausted Lieutenant and the unconscious Immermann, collapsing in a panting heap. They bound up the great wound in his thigh with all their field-dressings, and made a rough sort of stretcher with two rifles and a couple of smocks.

'Come on,' ordered Lieutenant Dobermann in a strange, high-pitched voice quite unlike his usual deep tones. 'He'll bleed to death if we don't get him back quickly.'

Unwillingly the little party ventured out from the shelter of the cave and resumed their slow and dangerous journey home.

'At what precise moment did you open fire, Lieutenant?' Von List's question was very gentle. Dobermann hesitated for an instant Better tell the truth. The story of the action would be round the whole battalion by morning. Besides it wasn't as if he had anything to be ashamed of. Sitting up very straight and thrusting out his broad chest, the blond young officer reported the whole exciting business in a firm, honest voice, much fortified by the coffee laced with schnapps. Captain Stempfe took it all down in his small, neat hand, now and then pursing his prim mouth and saying, 'A little slower, Lieutenant, if you please.' The Colonel made an occasional note on his blotter. Major Holmers, the only other occupant of the room, sat quietly smoking one of his smelly little cheroots.

'I think that's all, sir,' finished Dobermann. He was flushed and his pale blue eyes shone very brightly. Reaction setting in, thought von List dispassionately. I'll get Buchner to give him something. He sat back in his chair, considering carefully how to phrase his next remark. Stempfe took the opportunity to clean his glasses which had got a little steamy. Germany couldn't fail, not with young leaders such as these, she couldn't. He took up his pen and waited. They all watched the commanding officer as he got up and began to pace the room with his thumbs in his belt.

'Second Lieutenant Dobermann behaved throughout this patrol with the very greatest skill and courage . . . ' The pale blue eyes shone even more brightly. 'His actions lived up to the very highest traditions of the Wehrmacht. Am I going too fast for you, Stempfe?'

'No, Herr Oberst, not at all,' answered the Adjutant, scribbling busily.

'By his outstanding leadership he was not only responsible for the destruction of an extremely valuable enemy ammunition dump but also for the infliction of heavy casualties, including the capture of an officer, upon an enemy patrol considerably superior in numbers.' He stopped by the battle-map and stood, swaying slightly backwards and forwards on his heels.

'Got that, Stempfe?'

'Yes, sir.'

'By his magnificent personal courage,' – Dobermann's mouth quivered slightly; his eyes gleamed wetly; it looked as if he might cry – 'in bringing a wounded man to safety at imminent risk to his own life, Lieutenant Dobermann has shown himself worthy of the very highest praise . . . ' He noticed Major Holmers staring very hard at the glowing end of the cheroot. Damn him, he must know this was the only way to do these things if you wanted to get anyone a decoration. And God knows, the man had earned one. Von List returned to his seat. Lieutenant Dobermann blew his nose. If only Ingrid could have heard those words! Young

Nordic hero brings wounded soldier to safety, thought von List.

'The very highest praise,' he repeated slowly, 'and the very highest award.' Dobermann's pale shining eyes rested on the Knight's Cross and his heart thumped painfully; he was suddenly short of breath. He hardly heard the calm, quiet voice.

'End it in the usual way, Stempfe. Get it ready for my signature at once.' So wrapped in his dreams of glory was he that the Lieutenant had to be addressed quite loudly before he came out of his haze.

'There is one thing that must be said, though.' The Colonel's eyes held his own very steadily.

'By opening fire when you did, you jeopardised the whole success of the patrol. But I expect you realise that yourself.' The reproof was mild, the tone no more than conversational, but Dobermann could do nothing but let his mouth fall open.

'This time you got away with it,' went on von List. 'But never forget that orders, my orders, are to be obeyed implicitly.' The tone hardened. 'I do not want my men killed and wounded through impetuous acts on the part of anyone, anyone at all.' Dobermann continued to stare open-mouthed. Captain Stempfe's glasses just had time to flash indignantly at such wishy-washy talk before the Colonel smiled warmly, holding out his hand.

'And now I want to congratulate you on behalf of the whole battalion on a job splendidly done. Well done.' He patted the bemused young officer on the shoulder. 'You've earned a good meal and a good night's sleep.' He looked round as Sergeant-Major Tomas came in.

'The prisoner's outside, sir,' he announced. 'Shall I bring him in?'

'Just a minute, Tomas.'

Dobermann was on his feet, towering like a large tree above the Colonel.

'Stempfe,' said von List.

'Yes, Herr Oberst.' Now what? That was the trouble with such a man, you never quite knew where you were. Or at least Stempfe didn't.

'I want you to arrange things with Sauer so that Herr Dobermann and the rest of the patrol get a really decent meal, something extra from Sauer's store, a drink and blankets for the rest of the night. Then you can get on to Captain Ziegler and tell him we'll send him back his heroes in the morning.' He moved rapidly about the room as he reeled off a stream of instructions.

'Good night, Dobermann – and thank you,' he said warmly. 'No, I'd like you to stay, Major Holmers. Right, off you go, Stempfe, and rout the Quartermaster out of his snug little bed.'

He sat down again and picked up the empty British grenade left by his predecessor as a paperweight.

'Very well, Sergeant-Major, you can bring in the prisoner.'

Saying it, he felt like a character in an over-dramatic play. So he was smiling when the British officer was ushered through the door none too gently by Sergeant-Major Tomas.

* * *

The commander of the Guards Brigade facing the Monte Colle massif was severely displeased. Not only had the explosion of the mortar dump rudely disturbed his evening meal, but the telephone in his Headquarters was ringing itself red-hot. There had been a nasty few moments with the Divisional Commander, who was searching for information with which to placate an intensely inquisitive Corps Commander who demanded to know the origin of 'that God-awful bang'.

'I shouldn't wonder if it didn't rattle the glasses on all the bars in Florence,' groaned the Brigadier, leaning his aching forehead in a hot hand. 'We'll have Fifteenth Army on to us next with Alex or someone complaining their soup was spilt. Get me Colonel David again.'

Some minutes later the commanding officer of the battalion responsible for the safety of the dump replaced his receiver with a pained expression on his face.

'I know it wasn't your fault, Alan, but somewhere along the line someone's howling for heads, so get your report in as soon as you can.'

'The trouble is the only chap who can give any kind of an account is Corporal Buchan, and he's pretty badly shaken. It may be a few hours before he's making much sense.'

'Do your best, there's a good chap.'

Some big German shells droned over on their way to the British battery positions. 'I suppose there's no possible chance of Charles having been hit and crawled into the trees?' he suggested hopefully.

'I've had the whole company combing the area,' said Major Lumsden. 'I'm afraid he's had it, or else he's in the bag. Damned bad luck, after only being in the line for ten days.'

'We'll give it a day or two before writing to his parents. It's going to be a difficult one. Odd really, isn't it? I mean, look at us. Months, years of it and nothing worse than a few bits chipped off, and there's a young chap like that, fresh out of OCTU and his first action. I don't know. Doesn't make sense.'

'Does any of it?' said the company commander.

* * *

The interrogation was a very short affair.

'Do you speak German?'

'No.'

'French?'

'Yes.'

Ensign Mackenzie stood stiffly to attention. There was a bandage round his head with a spot of red in the front. His face was filthy and blood had spilt down his battledress blouse in dark pear-drop stains.

'Sit down,' said von List, nodding at the chair. The boy remained as he was, staring at some point above the German's head. Now and then he shook his own to clear the muzziness.

'Put him on the chair, Tomas.'

The big Sergeant-Major forced Mackenzie on to the chair.

'Take your hands off me,' he exclaimed angrily in English, but he sat down, glaring sullenly about him. Dark hair, messy with dried blood; thin features, blue-grey eyes: Holmers, looking at the two men, thought, they could almost be brothers.

'They say you put up a good fight,' said von List. The boy was very like the Polish cavalry subaltern captured on the first day of the war on the Poznan Plain. The same sullen defiance smouldering in the eyes. That one had hurled himself at his captors, fighting like a wild beast; this one looked slightly tamer.

'But then the British Guards always fight well,' he said casually. The expression gave away nothing, but the eyes flickered for an instant.

'My name is Mackenzie. My rank is Second-Lieutenant. My number is – ' He broke off. The German officer facing him seemed to have fallen asleep. Covered all over in Iron Crosses and things, but he didn't look like the black-uniformed killers he'd heard so much about.

'I remember the Guards in Houthulst Forest,' said the older officer present in bad French. 'Irish, I think they were. Or perhaps Scots. Fine soldiers.'

'Have you had anything to eat?' asked von List still with his eyes closed, his head bent back.

'Yes.' Against his will, Mackenzie added, 'thank you.'

'You'll go back from the front,' said the German colonel, opening his eyes and staring at the man who was supposed to be his enemy with the same clear, steady look he had given Dobermann. 'I cannot of course answer for the treatment you may receive as you get further from the front-line, but while you are in our charge you will be looked after in as humane a way as the circumstances allow. We don't all eat our prisoners alive.' Again against his will, Mackenzie found himself smiling in answer. He was swaying in the chair.

'But should you be so stupid as to try and escape,' continued von List in the same tone, 'then very probably you will end up dead.' The spot on the bandage was swelling to a ripe red plum almost as he watched. Picking up the telephone, he asked for the Medical Officer.

'He's on his way across at the moment, Herr Oberst,' said

Medical Sergeant Eisner from the corner of the barn used as the Aid Post.

'Now,' began von List to his prisoner.

'My name is – ' Ensign Mackenzie put his hand to his head. Then without warning he fainted, slumping sideways to the floor.

'War's an unfair game,' said Holmers, as he and Tomas put him back on the chair, holding him steady as he came round. 'Dobermann gets all the trimmings of a hero, his opposite number gets this.'

'Why confine your philosophy to war?' von List asked. 'It's certainly not the only game that's unfair.' At that moment Captain Buchner presented himself with one of his most unmilitary salutes.

'Ah, Buchner. How's Immermann?'

'As comfortable as anyone can be with most of his thigh missing,' said Buchner. 'With luck he'll live.'

'And the other one? Kumitsch, isn't it?'

'A night in the Aid Post will put him right. A dashing scar on his face and a welt along his side. Some of God's children are born lucky.' Von List touched the scars on his own face. 'Yes, Buchner, they are. Damned lucky. Have you a bed for this one? Till tomorrow night.'

With a tremendous effort Ensign Mackenzie managed to draw himself up and walk from the room. 'Put a guard on the barn, Tomas,' said von List. 'I don't want any nonsense about shot while trying to escape. We had enough of that unpleasantness in Russia.'

Thirty-eight unarmed men sprawling in the snow near Tula. The merciless Spandaus cutting down the shuffling column of beaten Siberians in the brazen sunshine of the Don steppe: running, screaming, spinning like ragged tops, spurting red in the feather grass.

'He'll be watched every moment he's in our hands,' he said harshly.

'Yes, Herr Oberst,' said Sergeant-Major Tomas.

'I'll stick a needle in him. He won't wake up till sometime late tomorrow.' Buchner sketched another vague salute and departed.

'Well,' yawned von List. 'I think we can now go to bed.'

'What a remarkable tonic even the smallest success can be,' Holmers stubbed out his dying cheroot.

'The first – ' Von List bit back the words. 'The first offensive success of the battalion for quite a time.' Major Holmers' feelings could be hurt like anyone else's. Yes, war was an unfair game to the steady, plodding players like Holmers.

'There'll be no holding the children now. They'll all be wanting to capture officers single-handed.'

That evening's work was indeed a tonic to the First Battalion. Number One Company was especially delighted with itself. Not only had its members achieved the first offensive success of the Regiment since it had come across from the Adriatic front, but now news reached it via the sharp-eared Private Runz that Number One was more than likely to spend Christmas Day out of the line.

So spirits were high in Captain Ziegler's company, and even the normally insufferable Dobermann seemed tolerable, moving about as he was with his blond, Aryan head stuck in its own private cloud of glory. Private Kumitsch was quite the little hero too, already proud of the scar that would decorate his face, and if his friend Kalbach felt any twinges of envy he did not allow them to show on his frank and innocent young countenance.

The little dog, Trudi, grinned gaily as she trotted about at the heels of her master or lay, curled up beside him, in the platoon bunker.

Corporal Hufnagel was eyed with increased respect by the children, the short trench-knife he wore at his belt with a certain morbid awe.

Private Immermann's friends visited him at the Aid Post until he was taken back to a field hospital north of Bologna and out of their lives for ever.

Poor Private Streicher had been in the Company for too short a time for him to be missed by anyone.

But it was in the ranks of Sergeant Telling's platoon that this sudden renewal of – for want of a better word – *élan* was most evident. For were they not the – for want of a better word – *élite* of the best company in the best battalion of the 68th Regiment? And did they not have as their leader a man with the Oakleaf with Swords and Diamonds? A man who spoke to them as human beings and not as if they were merely a pack of disciplined animals; a man who laughed with them and said things no Lieutenant-Colonel had ever said before? To the old hands the spirit in the platoon, no, the entire battalion, was reminiscent of the good old days of Poland and France, and Russia before that first winter of '41.

'My first Christmas out of the line for three years,' said Captain Ziegler.

'What'll you lads be putting in Telling's stocking?' asked the one-eyed Sergeant with heavy wit.

'A stick grenade, Sergeant,' chorused the children with great good humour.

8

MARIELENA CRESPI was born of mountain stock in the shadow of Monte Colle in the room above the little wine shop kept by Signor Crespi, her father. Until her twenty-second year – the year the war came to Rocca San Michele – she had never been further than the local villages of Vergata and Praduro e Sasso, riding slowly in one of her father's ox-carts, crying at the lumbering white oxen in her warm, husky voice and casting glances at the young men that melted the very bones in their bodies.

The little *trattoria* was always filled with the men of Casaglia, San Martino and the other communities inhabiting the valleys below Monte Colle. Some came to drink, some to gossip in the dusty sunshine, all to admire and flirt with Marielena and her younger sister, Sophia.

'You're the honeypots,' said Signor Crespi proudly, 'and they're the flies. Hurry along, girls. A customer must never be kept waiting.' The girls sang and laughed and teased each other as they helped their parents: sweeping and cleaning, carrying the flagons of raw red wine, or scrubbing the two long tables till they shone like sunlit wheat. Someone in that house was always singing or shouting in a sudden flare of anger, for they were a passionate family. The girls fell in and out of love at least three times every summer, and the two brothers, on their brief visits from Bologna or Modena or wherever it was they had found temporary employment, set up a great flutter among the girls of the district with their curly black hair and fauns' eyes.

'*Dio mio*,' Signora Crespi would sigh fondly. 'What a pair of wicked ones.' She would beam and fold her massive bare arms across her wine-barrel breasts and shout something affectionate at her husband or daughters.

Marielena never kept up with her brothers' activities; she was too busy living the moment: her latest love affair – or the sickness or labour of some favourite animal: ox, donkey, cat, or one of the flea-ridden mongrels that ran about half-wild. Oh, to be sure, there was a war going on somewhere beyond the mountains, and the iron-grey soldiers were gathering in ever greater numbers, marching about the slopes of Monte Colle as if they owned the mountain. Now and then aeroplanes droned through the short summer nights; the darkness trembled to the bombs and the gunfire and the skies above Bologna glowed red. At such times Signor Crespi muttered furiously, 'What's it got to do with us? Let them kill each other. See if I care. It's nothing to do with Italians any more.'

Far away, many miles beyond Florence, the war came creeping nearer like some vile slug dragging behind it a black trail of destruction. Every day the grey armies fell back through the Tuscan hills, until one still night they heard it for the first time: an evil muttering from the South.

'Guns,' said Signor Crespi. 'Now the whole stupid business will soon be over. You'll see, when the English and Americans take Florence, then the Tedeschi will give up, mark my words. None of them will want to fight in the mountains. You'll see, when the other side's across the Arno, the Tedeschi will go home to where they belong. Mark my words, women.'

The very next day a German engineer unit moved into Rocca San Michele, setting up a small encampment of camouflaged tents and trucks. The soldiers were very correct under their handsome young captain and no one was molested, and even though the other two families decided to leave for the North, the Crespis saw no reason to desert their home which they loved dearly.

For two months the engineers were stationed at Rocca San Michele. During daylight hours the handsome captain supervised the building of the Monte Colle defences; in the warm summer evenings he relaxed, occupying himself with the congenial task of teaching German to the eldest of the daughters, the one with the tawny-red hair and long dark eyes. Marielena repeated the German phrases in her warm, husky voice, gazing in a most friendly fashion at her handsome tutor who by now had little competition, for the young men of the neighbourhood had vanished to escape being conscripted into work on the concrete and steel defacement of Monte Colle. Many of these Italians had headed westwards to join the various partisan groups.

'Stupid idiots,' growled Signor Crespi. 'What do they want to do that for? Why fight the Tedeschi? Leave them alone, they'll fall apart by themselves, you mark my words.'

Then, on a blazing day in late August the handsome captain drove away with his men, waving sadly to the assembled family through the billowing dust.

To take his place came the advance party of the First Battalion, 68th Regiment under Lieutenant Stempfe, not then Adjutant, and Second-Lieutenant Huth.

From the very moment she set eyes on him, marching proudly and thickly powdered with white dust at the head of his men, Marielena took rather a fancy to Lieutenant Huth. True, he wasn't so handsome as the Engineer, but the tanned skin showed off his thick fair hair and dark blue eyes to the best advantage. 'They certainly have some fine boys in this army of theirs,' she said to Sophia. 'And some of the other sort,' answered her sister, who had seen Lieutenant Stempfe.

In the evenings when the day's preparations for the battalion

were completed and Stempfe relaxed on his bed drinking Signor Crespi's best wine and exciting himself with thoughts of women and the more tanciful type of orgy, Lieutenant Huth was to be found busily sketching. He was not, as the Crespis imagined, planning more destruction; he was creating beauty as fast as his remarkably talented pencil could cover the paper. Coming straight from a hutted Cadet School and before that from his badly shaken home in the battered cauldron of the Ruhr, Huth had never seen anything remotely like these mountains and their inhabitants, and certainly never such a magnificent creature as Marielena Crespi. He longed for the colours with which to capture the sunlight trapped in the depths of her chestnut hair, and the mischievous sparkle in her long eyes.

The tormented artist tore up sketch after sketch or in desperation turned his attention to the great shapeless bulk of Signora Crespi or her shirtsleeved husband, and then suddenly his straining pencil took fire in his hands and he was almost satisfied. He was roughing in the donkey beside her when Marielena came out of the barn where she had been feeding the stalled oxen and slowly up the path towards him, moving with a sway of her wide hips that brought the blood to his head and a little gasp to his lips.

'Good evening,' he said shyly, raising a strong brown hand to his soft-peaked cap in polite greeting. Lowering her eyes, the girl continued on her way in silence. Nonplussed, Huth watched her straight back and the polished sheen of her bare legs below the faded red skirt. After a few steps she suddenly stopped and spun round with the skirt flaring and laughter in her face.

'Good evening, Herr Offizier.' She approached closer. 'What are you drawing? Or perhaps I shouldn't ask? Perhaps it's a soldier's secret?'

'But you speak German.' She enjoyed the astonishment in his eyes.

'Is it only Germans who should speak German?' she asked. 'Perhaps there's a new order we haven't been told – ' He found her slow and halting phrases utterly charming; the warm, bubbling spring of half-hidden laughter was as infectious as a most delightful disease. Soon they were getting on famously. He showed her the drawing.

'Of course it's only a beginning,' he said hesitantly. 'When it's finished – '

'But – it's me.' She scuffed up the dust with her bare feet, holding the drawing now at arm's length, now close to her dancing eyes.

'You like it?'

'*Like* it?' Her lips were parted softly showing small white teeth. 'Like it,' she repeated. 'I think it's beautiful. Beautiful.' Huth flushed with pleasure at her tone. After some more highly

pleasant and satisfactory conversation she suddenly said,

'I must get back. I have to help my mother.'

'Perhaps I can walk with you.'

'Why not?' She glanced at him under her thick black lashes. 'I have no quarrel with the Germans.'

'And I like to stay on good terms with our allies,' said Huth, laughing and walking as close as he dared. As they came opposite the small yellow house taken over by Lieutenant Stempfe, the man himself emerged buckling his belt.

'Ah, there you are, Herr Huth.' He tried to ignore the girl. For all his longings and unattractive dreams, the Lieutenant was supremely ill-at-ease with women; in fact, without a skinful of drink inside his paunchy stomach he hadn't the nerve so much as to touch a prostitute's little finger.

'It seems to me,' he continued sarcastically, 'that you consider this job of ours to be no more than some sort of rest-cure.' His spectacles flashed in the lowering sun. 'Well, just to dispel any such illusions here is a little work for you. Military work,' he added meaningly with a pinched leer to show how human he was. 'You will hold yourself in readiness to return to Bologna and meet the battalion which is expected – ' He stopped himself briskly. You never knew; even this mouth-watering girl standing there demurely, drawing patterns with a bare toe in the dust, even she had ears. She had other things too, he thought, the blood suddenly pounding heavily in his head. His eyes darted across her high, prominent breasts and the sweat started under his arms.

'All right then, you heard me,' he said hoarsely. 'Be ready to move within an hour. You will take Corporal Hufnagel with you. Very well then, don't stand gawping like an idiot. Get a move on!' He shouted the last bit, showing this luscious peasant girl the virile masculinity of the true German officer.

'Yes, sir,' said Huth stolidly. With a quick glance at Marielena he saluted, turned on his heel and marched away.

'And now, Signorina,' said Lieutenant Stempfe, still shouting to keep up his rapidly dissolving courage.

'Yes?' Her eyelashes fluttered for an instant, then the windows opened wide and she gazed boldly out. Stempfe's bony knees turned to jelly, his heart leapt chokingly into his mouth at the frank, hot look in her eyes. He was speechless, mouthing like a strange, crumpled fish.

'You wished to speak to me?'

'I – I – that is – ' Her blue-black eyes scorched him from the damp soles of his feet to the inside of his steaming cap.

'Perhaps the Herr Offizier would rather talk' – her voice fell to a husky purr – 'somewhere a little more private.' The eyelashes dropped like tiny black curtains. A few curious private soldiers in their shirt-sleeves were lounging against a wall not far away, lazily spitting out grape pips. Corporal Hufnagel's powerful

voice could be heard shouting for Kalbach 'to get a bloody move on and put his bloody kit into the bloody truck'. Forestalling the floundering Stempfe, Marielena spoke quickly, her voice warmer and more full of promise than ever:

'The oxen have to be tended – just before midnight. Unless I'm kind to them, they get lonely.' With these words, said in a tone guaranteed to titillate the most jaded of appetites, the girl ran towards the *trattoria*, raising little puffs of dust, leaving Lieutenant Stempfe in a daze of excitement and anticipation.

No one ever knew what really happened in the ox-barn, no one, that is, except for the two Crespi sisters and Lieutenant Stempfe.

For on that sweltering August night, the only bomb ever to hit Rocca San Michele tumbled from a stricken bomber struggling back from a raid on Milan, thoroughly wrecking the little *trattoria*, wounding two private soldiers and blowing more personal and intimate adventures into the background.

Strange things happened in the barn that night. Splinters from the errant bomb killed two of the soft-eyed oxen; a donkey, grotesquely garbed in a straw hat and a length of coloured material fashioned to resemble a girl's skirt and with a wide red bow tied to its tail, met death from a pistol bullet in the head. Sophia Crespi arrived at the shattered remains of the wine-shop in a state of great agitation; her white shirt was ripped to the waist and the angry marks of a man's clawing fingers lay across her half-naked breasts, followed shortly after by her sister, also distraught. But their parents, dazed by the blast and the sudden destruction of their home, were in no fit mood to take in their daughters' dishevelled and excited state.

Sergeant Blaun, the senior N.C.O. of the advance party, who had taken command of the confusion in the village during the absence of Lieutenant Stempfe, thought his own thoughts when Stempfe had appeared. What was it to him if the man had lost his spectacles and his cap; was partially unbuttoned from collar to crutch, and with a bump on his head the size of a bloody hen's egg? Having long discovered that it didn't pay to meddle in officers' indiscretions, Sergeant Blaun kept his own counsel. Besides, what an imbecile like Stempfe did in his spare time was of little interest to Blaun.

As for Lieutenant Stempfe, he also said nothing. For no man, least of all an officer of the Greater German Wehrmacht, greatly relishes the fact of having been tricked and thoroughly outwitted by two girls and a donkey – even though the animal did pay for its part in what had begun as a girlish prank.

The day after the bomb Lieutenant Stempfe discovered, to his incredulous relief, that the Crespis had gone. As far away as possible, he said to himself. With any luck a shell may get the lot, he thought viciously, tenderly feeling the bruise on his head

where, though of course the furious, frightened Stempfe did not know that, Marielena Crespi had hit him with an ox-yoke.

By the evening, however, he was able to put the very unpleasant and shameful incident out of his mind, for he was made Adjutant of the First Battalion with back-dated promotion to Captain. With all the activity and organisation caused by the arrival of the battalion, there was fortunately little time for brooding. Anyway, he told himself time and time again, if I hadn't had the misfortune to trip and lose my glasses, I could have subdued that spitfire of a girl with one hand. As for the donkey, it hadn't been his fault the pistol had gone off like that.

And so, with such excuses to his outraged pride, the newly promoted Captain Stempfe tried to erase the sordid little affair of Marielena Crespi from his mind.

They went sadly away from their home and their mountain, creaking slowly behind the two remaining oxen on the glaring white road that wound down to the plains, wrapped in their gloomy thoughts.

'We'll come back,' said Marielena, flicking at the dusty white rumps with the whip. 'One day we'll come back.' In her heart there was hatred for the lusty young soldiers they passed, swinging along through the summer dust, moving up to occupy the new mountain line. She paid no attention to their looks of admiration, nor to the shouted compliments.

'*Dio mio*,' sighed her mother in deep distress, 'shall we ever see our home again?' Her husband no longer said things about its not being their war. He sat, hunched on the swaying seat, hardly noticing the dust clouds that enveloped them as military vehicles rushed past, staring at the endless columns of infantry with dull eyes. Once he spoke, saying:

'If Beniamino cannot have us, then God knows what will become of us.' Beniamino was his younger brother who kept a small restaurant in the southern suburbs of Bologna, and to whose care they intended to commit themselves.

'God knows,' he repeated. 'God only knows.'

Sophia walked silent beside the cart, trying to forget the horrible feel of the German's hands on her bruised and tender breasts.

'We will manage,' said Marielena from between compressed lips. Once her family were safe she knew exactly what she was going to do. There would be work for women where her brothers had gone.

Then, among the soldiers tramping past the cart, she saw a blond young face that reminded her suddenly of the officer who had drawn her picture, the one with the kind blue eyes and strong sunburned arms. And thinking of him she became con-

fused in her mind, not knowing whether to hate or to smile at the cheerful greetings called at her from all sides.

9

CAPTAIN STEMPFE looked through the evening batch of stuff from Regiment, listening with half an ear to the conversation between the Colonel and the Sergeant-Major . . . 'This time three years ago, Tomas; the last push that was to get us into Moscow.' Von List smiled at a sudden memory. 'For the first man to sight the spires of Moscow, to him the victor's crown – something inspiring like that anyway.' The Adjutant glanced across suspiciously. He had noticed with increasing uneasiness that the new commanding officer was rather too inclined to speak disparagingly about subjects deserving a more respectful tone. Besides, this habit of addressing the Sergeant-Major by his name – there was no telling where that sort of laxness could end. Stempfe pursed his small mouth reprovingly.

'Excuse me, sir, but this needs signing for.' He handed von List the long brown envelope. The latter signed the receipt book absently, thinking of the white-clad Russians moving like wolves through the trees as Zhukov launched the first of the great counter-offensives.

'There's no doubt they caught us unbuttoned that time!' he said. The envelope, he saw, originated from Division. He dropped it on the table.

'For immediate attention, Herr Oberst,' pointed out Stempfe.

'It was certainly a shambles, sir,' said Sergeant-Major Tomas. 'The first time Ivan showed his teeth.' He watched as von List slit the envelope very tidily with his pocket knife. Without him the platoon would never have got out of the trap; he remembered the triumphant shouts of the Russian infantry as they closed in on the broken remnants of the battalion at bay in that bloody forest, the magnificent courage and leadership of this man who had led them to safety with a hole in his arm you couldn't have plugged with a large potato and blood pouring out of him like beer from a leaking barrel.

Von List got up and slowly paced the room reading the contents of the single sheet, frowning slightly now and then. From next door came the loud pounding of Lindberg's typewriter and the rich smell of roasting chestnuts. Suddenly von List threw down the paper so that Stempfe, from the corner of his eye, saw that it was another Order of the Day. There had been quite a few

lately, all filled with encouragement and exhortations, but not, to Stempfe's way of thinking, sufficiently strongly worded with regard to such matters as dress and deportment. Now, if he'd had *his* way, he'd have . . .

'Sergeant-Major, would you send someone to the Mess with my compliments to Major Holmers and would he join us for a moment.' Tomas went into the clerk's room. Von List cleared a space among the papers and began to lay out his small, dirty patience cards very precisely and neatly. Though bursting with curiosity the Adjutant did not venture to speak. If only Stempfe was a man one wanted to talk to, thought von List coldly. But for the tiny slap of the cards and the angry scratching of Stempfe's pen, the room was quiet. What a domestic scene, thought Major Holmers as he came through the blanketed doorway. It only needs a cat in front of the stove.

'I'm sorry to drag you away from your chess – I imagine you were playing your usual marathon with Buchner ?' Holmers nodded with a smile. 'But I'd like you to read this,' he held out the paper. 'Perhaps you'd care to read it aloud.' Von List peered under a card. 'Ah, that's where the king was.'

'Commander, Forty-Ninth Grenadier Division,' read Major Holmers in his slow methodical voice, '16th December, 1944.' He cleared his throat.

'It has come to my notice that certain rumours of an alarmist nature are being circulated throughout this division to the effect that both on the Eastern and Western Fronts a complete collapse of the German armies has taken place.' Here he paused. Von List gathered the cards together into a pack and began to lay them out again.

'I wish to make quite clear,' continued Holmers, 'that this gross calumny is absolutely and utterly false. On *no* front has the Wehrmacht suffered so great a defeat that it cannot at will resume the offensive.' He paused again. Very diplomatically phrased, von List thought, searching for the three of spades. 'Well, go on,' he urged. 'This is fascinating.'

'These rumours emanate, as does all such defeatist nonsense, from the rear, spreading like some noxious gas to the fighting troops.' This is the stuff, thought Stempfe. He's fairly giving it to them. Good old Skull-head.

'Unit commanders will, without fail, bring the contents of this Order to the attention of all ranks under their command. They will also make it very clear that the penalties for any man caught spreading alarm or attempting to sow the seeds of defeat are exceptionally severe. In certain cases it could mean a sentence of death.' The pause was slightly longer.

'Is that all, Holmers ?'

'No,' said Holmers. 'One more paragraph.' Stempfe had liked the bit about death. Nothing was too bad for defeat-mongers and

the like. Nothing. He had seldom felt so indignant.

'I neither expect nor will I tolerate the slightest sign of defeatist spirit in the Forty-Ninth Division. I hope I have made myself clear. Signed, Fritschauer, General of Infantry.'

Holmers put the Order on the table beside the cards and got out one of his cheroots.

'There's been nothing like this in the First Battalion,' said the Adjutant, suddenly sitting to attention. 'That I can assure the Herr Oberst.'

'The Herr Oberst thanks you,' remarked von List. This time the patience was going to come out.

'If there had,' Stempfe went on, 'it would certainly have come to my notice, and then naturally I should have stamped on any such filth with the severity it deserved.' He was scarlet in the face. The Major puffed quietly at his cheroot, regarding the angry little man through the blue smoke.

'But of course you can't stop them thinking,' observed von List. 'Or talking among themselves. They aren't all such utter fools as to believe that our troops are galloping forward to the gates of Moscow and Paris. Or do you think they are, Stempfe?'

'Are what, Herr Oberst?' The Adjutant was momentarily confused. Did the man mean, were they galloping or were they believing?

'A good soldier does what he is told,' he answered, playing safe. 'And does not concern himself with things beyond his immediate area of operations.'

'We have all been doing just that for a very long time.' Von List turned over the final card. Stempfe glared from one to the other, but Major Holmers had turned to study the map on the badly whitewashed wall, thinking, perhaps it is the awful little Stempfes that keep the rest of us going when anyone but the Stempfes can see the war was lost last year.

'For us of the First Battalion there can be no such word as defeat,' announced Captain Stempfe with such insufferable pomposity that von List had a great longing to scream or hurl his cards into the sharp, conceited face.

'Last man, last bullet? Is that it?' he asked.

'Yes, sir. Of course.' Startled by something in the Colonel's tone, his Adjutant added,

'I should have thought the Herr Oberst of all people – ' Catching the look in von List's eyes, he broke off in some confusion.

'That is – I mean – '

'Yes, Stempfe?' The tone was soft as silk; the Knight's Cross shone dully in the light. Fortunately for Captain Stempfe, at that moment relief came in the form of the field telephone.

'Yes,' said von List. 'Yes, Ziegler, what is it?' After a brief talk he replaced the receiver.

'Ziegler reports something odd going on opposite his forward

positions. A loud sort of crackling noise, he says. Nothing else. No voices or engines.' He turned the handle of the second telephone.

'That you, Tomas? Would you mind sticking your head out of the door and seeing if you can hear anything out of the ordinary. I'll hold on.' He leant back in his chair. 'Crackling,' he said. 'What on earth could be crackling?' When he grinned like that he looked about sixteen years old, thought Holmers. 'Yes, Tomas . . . Right, I'll come out. Thank you. Tomas agrees that there's something going on. He describes it as whistling.'

The three officers stood in the snow listening to the strange sounds coming from the direction of the British lines. More like a gigantic wireless between stations, von List decided; squealing and screeching.

'Ring up all companies, Stempfe, and tell them to get a fix on it. Then get through to Major Kramer and tell him there may be a target for him. He's always longing to poop off with those guns of his. Here's a chance.'

'More like a bloody crowd of cats fighting,' said Tomas. His breath steamed in the freezing night. Near them the sentry stopped on his slow round of Battalion Headquarters and stood listening. Voices spoke up in the thin snow light.

'What's going on?' The man sounded nervous, possibly thinking of secret weapons. 'What are they playing at? Heh, Heinrich, come out and listen to this lot.'

The caterwauling ceased. For a second or two there was silence, and then suddenly an enormous voice boomed out:

'Soldiers of Germany,' it thundered. 'For you the war is almost over . . . Give up and you will get decent treatment . . . Put your hands up and live . . . ' The monstrous voice rolled among the white peaks, up and down the valleys in huge waves of harsh sound.

'Your country is in ruins,' it bellowed hideously. 'Your families are suffering to satisfy the wishes of a madman . . . Come over to us . . . Soldiers of the Wehrmacht, you have done all that was required of you . . . Give up! Give up! Give up! . . . '

Von List hurried back to the telephone.

'Get me the mortars, and hurry!' Then he got on to Major Kramer.

'It'll take them a bit of time to dismantle everything,' he said. 'Well done, Kramer. I knew you'd enjoy it. I know, I should think they can hear this thing in Berlin. Yes, as soon as we've got a bearing.' He rang up the companies.

'No small arms fire. Understood? I know they want to, Ziegler, but I'm not having the positions given away by a lot of wild firing . . . Roske makes it just east of San Martino, Yes, I agree . . . probably Point 613. I'm getting the mortars on to it . . . '

One last call to Major Kramer, Divisional Artillery . . . 'Point 613 . . . to catch them as they're getting out of it. That's the stuff, Kramer. Keep those idle gunners of yours a bit warmer . . . '

'It's stopped, sir.' Stempfe poked his helmeted head round the door. The Adjutant always wore his steel helmet for going out. After all a man in his position had to set a good example.

'Splendid,' said von List. Stempfe had not seen him look so happy for some time. Quite mischievous, he thought sourly.

'I'm coming out to watch the fireworks.' Bareheaded! Really, what slackness. Captain Stempfe followed more slowly.

The night split open in a sudden crash of sound as the artillery opened fire, to be joined a moment later by the big mortars stationed in the deep ravine a few hundred yards west of Battalion Headquarters. Major Kramer's shells howled happily close above Monte Colle and the heads of Number One Company; the heavy mortar bombs streaked high into the sky before plunging swiftly towards Point 613, the small scrub-covered hill where a British major of psychological warfare and his three busy minions packed up their loudspeaker and wire.

From Machine-gun Post Six the display was most effective, specially when the battery of *nebelwerfers* opened up trailing long tails of sparks as they rose, adding their moaning song to the avalanche of death descending on Point 613.

'I wouldn't be at the wrong end of all this,' said Kumitsch, his eye glued to the Spandau slit, feeling the night tremble to the blast of the German shells, watching the bright red flashes of the explosions.

'It must take some guts to come along like that and set up a private broadcasting station.' Kalbach was watching the pounding of the little hill from the other observation slit.

'Perhaps they weren't expecting this sort of answer,' Kumitsch said. The night vibrated to the passage of the shells, as if they travelled along invisible wires.

'But you don't really think the Tommies expected us to go over with our hands up.' Kalbach sounded shocked. 'Just because someone bawls a pack of lies into a microphone.'

When the last echoes of the shells had faded among the mountains and the night was quiet again Kumitsch said very softly:

'It's happening, isn't it?'

'Not here.'

'No. But in France – '

Away to the right a Spandau ripped off a long burst, another one joined in. A parachute flare burst into cold white light and floated slowly down towards the German line on Monte Vergate. They heard the thumping reply of a Bren gun, a crackle of rifle shots. Silence.

'Heinrich?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want to give up?' Kalbach whispered the words. Even the youngest of the children knew that men kicked their lives away at the end of a rope for mentioning such things. To the south, towards Florence, the searchlights spread in a vast fan across the night and their light spilled on to the snow-slope leading down into the darkness of the valley. Artificial moonlight they called this ghostly luminance which was such a blessing or such a deadly nuisance to the front-line nfantry.

'Even if I did,' answered Kumitsch very low, 'what would be the use?'

His friend shivered and drew the collar of his greatcoat tighter round his neck.

'Well,' said Captain Stempfe, holding his gloved hands to the stove back inside Battalion Headquarters. 'I fancy it will be some time before our loud-mouthed friend tries to talk to the First Battalion again.' He beamed smugly.

'It may bring home to all concerned that the war is unfortunately not so near to finishing as many seem to think.' Not while there are men like you, Holmers thought, watching his Commanding Officer as he sat on the edge of the table swinging his leg and glancing idly at the Order of the Day.

'Anyway, not in Italy,' von List added. 'With these mountains on our side there's no reason why it should ever end.' He rubbed at the twin scars with finger and thumb. 'Which, I'm sure you'll both agree, is a fairly gruesome thought.'

Stempfe stopped beaming, hardly believing his ears. He looks like a pinched-up schoolmaster whose star pupil has just told him that Archimedes didn't know what he was talking about, thought Holmers.

'My dear Stempfe,' chuckled von List, 'you can take that horrified look off your face. I'm not going to pack my bag and march out with my handkerchief waving on the end of a stick. But this' – his voice changed as he hit the paper lightly with his hand – 'I don't really think we need bother the Battalion with it.'

'But, Herr Oberst – ' The Adjutant got no further; he seemed to be temporarily unwell.

'An Order of the Day is compulsory reading,' advised Holmers cautiously.

'Not for us it isn't,' said von List gaily.

'But – ' tried Stempfe again.

Von List's long fingers hovered threateningly over the edge of the paper, then, relaxing, he told the stupefied Stempfe to put it away in the safe.

'And now we'll treat ourselves to a glass of that splendid brandy provided from somewhere by the incredible Sauer.'

10

On Christmas Eve Colonel Clausitz was in the best of good humours, beaming and rubbing his hands as he glanced around the little gathering of officers at von List's Headquarters. He was going the round of his Regiment, taking refreshment off each unit in turn and making the same little speech of encouragement in every officers' and sergeants' mess (or so they liked to call their various barns, ox-stalls and *casas*), sometimes adding another one impromptu whenever sufficient corporals and privates could be gathered together. Colonel Clausitz had the warm, and totally erroneous, feeling that his speech was being received with interest and gratitude. This feeling had been much fortified by Captain Schiffers, his Adjutant, as they drove from battalion to battalion and battery to battery in the large Mercedes proudly flying the pennant of the 68th Regiment, unfortunately invisible in the dark.

'. . . and so, gentlemen,' he continued, brushing delicately at imaginary crumbs on his glossy tunic, 'it would appear that, owing to the sudden tremendous counter-attack delivered against the American Negro Division on the Mediterranean flank and the resulting confusion in the enemy lines making it quite impossible to mount anything in the way of an attack at least until the – until the – ' He hesitated badly, finding himself out of control.

'Danger of an offensive definitely receded until spring,' prompted Captain Schiffers in a hissing undertone.

'Until the advent of spring,' said Colonel Clausitz, recovering his place. 'It looks as if the Regiment can really allow itself the luxury of partial relaxation at this season of sacred festivity. But only partial, gentlemen,' he added. 'We must never forget that watchfulness is our password. The Sixty-Eighth Regiment will never be caught napping, not even on this, the most precious of German nights.' The Colonel, visibly moved, stood silently smoothing back his silver hair and regarding the shining ebony of his field boots. A few feet shuffled uneasily; people cleared their throats. Sentimental twaddle, thought Captain Simmering, emptying another glass of Sauer's champagne down his throat – produced from the magic hat, half a dozen bottles firmly stamped, 'Reserved for the Wehrmacht'. Sacred festivity indeed! With the whole place jigging up and down to the music of the bombardment. He removed another glass from the tray of Corporal Leiser, who circulated as though he was waiting on a Mess party in Germany.

'Don't look so shocked, Huth.' Simmering laughed, breaking

the silence. 'Grab one and drink up while the stuff's available. What's bothering you? Too much like a cocktail party while the shells are falling, is that it?' Huth's round face was scarlet; he did not answer. All eyes were turned in his direction.

'Let him be,' muttered Buchner from where he leant against the wall surveying the scene with his usual air of sardonic detachment.

'An officer must at all times share the dangers and discomforts of the men, eh. That's what they taught you, didn't they?' Simmering was more than a little drunk. In four hours' time he'd be back up that bloody mountain. Drink up; sleep it off for a couple of hours; stick your head in a bucket of snow and, hey presto, the man of action again. He tossed down the contents of the glass in one.

'Wash your teeth in bubbles,' he cried, squinting at the empty glass. 'Swill it round and hear it hiss. Like the sound of the sea on pebbles.' Captain Simmering sat down abruptly on the red plush sofa.

Colonel Clausitz looked across very sharply, his forehead contracting in an angry frown.

'Well,' said Captain Schiffers with a sniff. 'I must say – ' He had the scrunched-up face of an elderly baby.

'Black troops must feel the cold badly,' said von List, thus preventing the moment from becoming unbearable. A general buzz of grateful conversation broke out among those gathered round the two Colonels. Von List watched Captain Simmering. He looked safe enough, talking to Buchner, but then so did an unexploded shell.

'Better keep an eye on him,' he warned Major Holmers quietly. Holmers nodded. What a way to behave, thought Captain Stempfe, glowing with self-righteous indignation. And in front of the Regimental Commander too. Surely von List would order him to leave the room. But von List had gone over to young Huth and seemed to be discussing the drawings on the wall. Stempfe looked away quickly from the girl and her donkey. If only he could think of some reasonable excuse he'd have the damned thing painted over. Seeking to dispel the unpleasant memory rising in his stomach like some filthy gas, Captain Stempfe went over to the attack.

'Which, in your opinion, Schiffers, is the worst, a nigger or a Jew?'

'Ah,' said his colleague, pretending to ponder the question deeply. 'There you have me, Stempfe. I think possibly, on balance, I would give the benefit of the doubt to our black brother. After all, monkeys are not really responsible for their actions, are they?' Schiffers thought that summing-up immensely funny and laughed so heartily that he slopped champagne all over his almost completely bare tunic.

'As our wonderful Führer so rightly put it, there is no such thing as coming to an understanding with the Jews,' said Stempfe.

'The hard and fast Either Or.' Captain Schiffers glanced from the corner of his repellent little eyes to see how Clausitz was taking this, for he knew him to be a great anti-Jew man. But the Regimental Commander was being charming to that rather oafish Holmers.

'Up the chimney with everyone,' called out Simmering suddenly.

'Steady,' murmured Buchner warningly. 'Silver-top didn't like that.'

But Colonel Clausitz determined to ignore the remark. After the season of good-will he would certainly speak to von List about the matter. For all his decorations and reputation as a leader he did not seem to be exercising the proper measure of control over his subordinates. Of course they were a pretty boorish lot. Not a real gentleman among them. This creature Holmers for instance: stinking of stale tobacco and God knows what else and with absolutely no conversation outside military subjects. War sent one some very severe trials to bear. He turned his attention to what Holmers was saying, flashing yet another of his smiles, his eyes as hard as blue glass.

'Make soap of them,' said Simmering, just as loudly.

'Captain Simmering,' said von List sharply, breaking off his conversation with Huth.

'Mince them into sausages and feed them to the Master Race, that's the – ' He stopped when he caught the look on von List's face, and relapsed into vague mumblings.

'If you must make those sort of remarks then I suggest you do it where only the enemy can hear you. I also suggest that you go and lie down until it's time for your company to return to the forward positions. I don't want them all facing the wrong direction. Come and see me before you move off. Well, Simmering, sweet dreams. Perhaps, Herr Doktor, you'd be so good as to put him on the right road to his bed.' Owing to the noise Messrs Schiffers and Stempfe were making with their patriotic utterances about the Jews, none of this was overheard by Colonel Clausitz, though he saw Simmering go weaving from the room accompanied by the impassive Buchner. Von List went over to Clausitz.

'I hope you will excuse Captain Simmering, Colonel, but he's not been well for the last day or two. He got a mortar bomb very close which shook him up rather. But he'll be all right. After Captain Ziegler he's the best Company Commander in this battalion, and that, as you know, Colonel, is saying a lot.' Major Holmers listened to this in silence; they both knew that Simmering was beginning to show the first tiny cracks. The cumulative

effects of too much war, too much explosive, too many stretches of fear, were starting to tell. They saw it in the man's eyes. He might last the course; he might go tomorrow They had to take the chance, for there was no one else. Even partially burnt-out, men like Simmering were worth their weight in bullets.

'No need to apologise for him,' replied Clausitz. 'Those of us who've been through it, we know what strains can be put upon a man, however experienced he may be. Ah, yes.' There was sweat on his red face, beading heavily above the thick eyebrows, like black caterpillars arching themselves lazily above his unsympathetic eyes; allowing memory to play expressively across his large face he sipped at the champagne. Medical Officer Buchner came back, and with him was Quartermaster Sauer, heading as always for the fire with his fat hands held out like two little battering rams.

'My congratulations,' Clausitz called. 'This is a very drinkable champagne. Only you could perform such miracles, my dear Sauer.' Sauer acknowledged the praise graciously, clicking his heels in the approved manner, answering demurely.

'I had hoped the Herr Oberst would find it welcome on a cold Christmas Eve.' The old rogue, thought Buchner admiringly; he didn't even know Clausitz was coming.

'*Weihnachtsabend*,' said Schiffers dreamily. 'The night when all true Germans should be deep in the bosoms of their families and – ' With a heavy sigh he reached for another glass from Corporal Leiser's tray.

'You're right, old comrade,' agreed Stempfe, doing the same. 'We are surely the only race to appreciate fully the glorious significance, the – '

'And how is it outside, Sauer, on this significant night?' asked von List.

'Quiet, sir. Very quiet.'

Disturbed only by the rustle of angels' wings, Buchner was sorely tempted to say.

'Even the British are not such utter swine as to go on shooting on Christmas Eve,' said Schiffers. He hiccuped gently.

'Good God,' muttered the doctor to Huth. 'I believe he's tight.' But Captain Schiffers was partly correct. The British had indeed ceased fire except for an occasional shell trundling along to tickle up some *Weihnachtsabend* celebration well to the rear; their gunners, having got rid of their nightly ration, were more occupied with rum and holly. The few missiles profaning the starlit sky bore upon their spinning sides such messages of goodwill as 'Happy Xmas to Adolf' and 'From Tommy to Jerry with Love'.

For this was live and let live time, when the darkness was only dangerous to geese and pigs and chickens, and possibly among the thousands who lay deep in the mountains waiting to kill each other there were one or two who pondered for a moment on the

reason behind this blessed calm.

'At Christmas 1914 they got out of their trenches and talked and laughed together,' said Major Holmers.

'I remember it well,' put in Sauer. 'We even swopped photographs and tobacco. I'll have a glass of that champagne, Corporal Leiser, if you please. Oh yes, that was the best day of the war.'

'Over on the west coast our comrades are advancing to the attack in the true manner of the Wehrmacht,' said Stempfe, blinking bravely through his steamed-up glasses. 'While we stagnate here on our backsides – '

'Miserably on the defensive,' added Comrade Schiffers, thrusting out his small chin.

'On the miserable defensive,' said Stempfe. 'I quite agree.'

Colonel Clausitz was taking this mad talk very seriously. Leaning well forward over his refilled glass he said:

'By God, you're right, that's what we should be doing! Attack! That's the word to fire the blood.' His face glistened as if he'd been bathing, for the room was very hot. Buchner sat on the plush sofa where Simmering had been and listened to the nonsense spouting from his Regimental Commander. More work for me. Fresh subjects for the unsung hero of the operating theatre. Huth sat down beside him looking confused.

'Have a drink,' urged Buchner without much interest. 'Then you can join them. Come on, Huth, I'll be right behind you. Into the mouths of the guns. Save them the trouble of firing.' Huth smiled uncertainly; he found everything most disconcerting.

'Here we have one of the best battalions in the Regiment, no, in the whole Division – '

'In the whole Division,' echoed Stempfe. 'Quite correct, sir.'

'And who takes the credit for this little lot?' asked Buchner. But Huth did not answer; he longed for paints and brush with which to transfer the sweating Clausitz to canvas.

'And what do we do with it?'

'What do we do with it, sir? Exactly,' said Stempfe owlishly. Dig a bloody big hole and shovel the whole lot in and let me get to bed while there's still some of this champagne to take with me, thought Corporal Leiser impatiently.

'Nothing too rash, for God's sake,' whispered Medical Officer Buchner to himself. He liked talking to himself, for then he didn't have to think up clever answers. For about five minutes Colonel Clausitz talked as a Regimental Commander might have talked in '39 or '40 or even, at a pinch, '41. Beside him von List fingered his starfish scars, trying very hard to keep his expression neutral. Courteously he waved away the wilting Corporal Leiser.

'Leave it all on the table,' he said. 'Thank you, Corporal Leiser, you must have taken a lot of exercise.'

Major Holmers took his seventh glass, but to a man of his

capacity this was no more than a bottle of Vichy water; he had a head like concreté.

Colonel Clausitz was beside himself with bright dreams of glory. . . . Inspired by its daring commander, the Sixty-Eighth Grenadier Regiment launched a fierce counter-attack which swept through the enemy positions and on to the gun-lines. For his superb leadership, the intrepid Colonel Clausitz was awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and –

'Yes, Schiffers, what is it, man?' he enquired testily, his day-dream shattered.

'The telephone, sir,' said Captain Schiffers very slowly and carefully. 'You're wanted on the telephone – ' he broke off for a slight burp. 'It's Colonel Freiburg.'

While the Regimental Commander was out of the room, Schiffers and Stempfe attempted an ill-tuned duet.

'I'm afraid you're in for a disturbed night, Holmers,' said von List sympathetically.

'Unless he drinks himself into a stupor.' Major Holmers shrugged.

Buchner lay back on the sofa with his feet up.

'What are you drawing?'

Huth was bent over his sketch block, now and then darting a quick glance towards the musical Adjutants who by now had their arms round each other's shoulders and were chorusing away like a couple of first year students out on the beer.

After a few more swift strokes Huth showed the result to the doctor, who broke into a great roar of laughter and slapped his thigh. 'By God, that's splendid. Huth, you're a bloody genius. Here, Sauer, take a look at this.'

'It's more of a caricature, really,' said Huth diffidently. Sauer's laughter was even louder, showing his battered false teeth; his button eyes sparkled. 'Like a couple of uniformed apes.' The drawing was done with merciless brilliance; the contorted faces, the twisted black pits of the singing mouths, the wild glee in the eyes: it was simian and yet too uncomfortably human.

'Stick tails on 'em,' wheezed Sauer between his laughter. The noise in the small room was deafening; the heat stifling. Von List felt a twinge in his side. What a revolting pair! Schiffers and Stempfe had stopped singing and were swopping stories that got progressively unfunnier as they dropped deeper into the slime. He glanced at his watch. With any luck Clausitz was being called for on the telephone and would leave at once.

'Has the Herr Oberst heard this one? About the Burgomaster who couldn't – who couldn't – ' The incredible funniness of what was coming prevented Captain Stempfe from continuing.

'Who couldn't what, Comrade Stempfe? Don't keep us in suspense.'

'Yes,' said von List coldly, 'please let us into the secret of the

unfortunate Burgomaster.' He knew he was trying to spoil their adolescent but really quite harmless fun and yet he was in no way a prude; usually he enjoyed a party as much as any man, but tonight – Simmering's remarks moved uneasily in his mind like harbour scum on black and sluggish water. 'Up the chimney with everyone.' A half drunk man who is losing his nerve shouts a stupid phrase. Why bother? But how many more men, half drunk and losing their nerves, were shouting remarks like that? For an instant he felt icily cold in the heat of the room and shivered.

'Something unpleasant walked over my grave just then. Do you ever have that feeling, Holmers?'

'Frequently,' said Holmers dryly. 'Only in my case it usually sits down.'

Von List's eyes glowed with quiet amusement.

'I like you, Holmers,' he said frankly. 'At the dreariest of moments you usually manage to come up with something guaranteed to break the boredom and dispel dull care.'

Major Holmers smiled slightly but did not reply. In the two months they'd been together he had come to like this man and admire him greatly, for he had a shrewd idea of how much pain von List very often suffered with no more outward sign than a tightening of his mouth and a worsening of his temper. Besides, Buchner, who had seen von List's scarred body, had told him a little.

'The Regimental Commander looks altogether too happy,' remarked Holmers in a low voice. 'I think we may very well have to pray to the good God to intercede on our behalf.'

'Hurrah!' shouted Stempfe when Colonel Clausitz had stopped speaking. He tore off his glasses and began wiping them unsteadily. Beside him Comrade Schiffers was trying to stand to attention about as successfully as a sapling in a strong breeze.

'These awards reflect the greatest credit on the First Battalion,' an inclining of the silver head and a wide smile in the direction of von List.

'And on the Regiment as a whole,' said Schiffers, swaying badly and speaking entirely out of turn.

'Three Iron Crosses,' said von List. 'This will be a great tonic to Number One Company.'

'One First and two Seconds. It shows that we of the Italian Front are in no way forgotten.' Stempfe jammed his glasses back on his long nose, slightly crooked. 'Who said that we were finished? Who dares to suggest that the soldiers of Greater Germany, of the First Battalion, are not prepared to hurl themselves forward at the enemy tomorrow, if need be?' He was beside himself, clenching his fists and making what he took to be grim, attacking faces.

'Why wait till tomorrow?' Buchner asked with some interest. Colonel Clausitz led the laughter that greeted Stempfe's fire-eating words.

'Fill up your glasses, gentlemen,' he cried, once again in the best of fettle, for on such occasions as these a certain amount of the credit always brushed off on the commander of the Regiment concerned. If they carried on like this something important in the way of a decoration would certainly come his way.

'A glass for Colonel von List,' he ordered. 'You, over there, a glass for your C.O.'

Huth brought the champagne.

'And now, gentlemen, a toast. When you are ready, Herr Doktor.' Buchner got slowly off the sofa.

'I drink to Lieutenant Dobermann, Iron Cross, First Class.'

'Lieutenant Dobermann, Iron Cross, First Class,' voices echoed into the champagne, all except Schiffers, who hiccuped, blowing a fine spray all over his Commander's breeches.

'Corporal Hufnagel, Iron Cross, Second Class.' Again the muffled responses. Before the next toast Colonel Clausitz spoke very sharply to his Adjutant.

'Will you kindly move away, Schiffers, and stop using my breeches as some kind of handkerchief.' Resuming his vibrant, toasting voice, Clausitz raised his glass for the third time.

'Private Heinrich Kumitsch, Iron Cross, Second Class.'

'Better go steady,' Buchner advised Huth in an undertone. 'We haven't nearly finished yet.'

'I give you the First Battalion – and its gallant commander.'

'Hurrah!' shouted Stempfe, emptying champagne down his neck. Colonel Clausitz waited, gazing expectantly at von List, smiling widely. Von List gazed back, also smiling. Something of an *impasse* seemed to be brewing.

'Reply,' whispered Holmers from the corner of his mouth. But von List merely continued to smile. After a few moments of this, which seemed like a hundred years, Colonel Clausitz's face was frozen like a large grinning pig's head, in the expectant expression. Buchner blew his nose loudly. Then suddenly von List sprang to life, stopped smiling and took a short step forward, raising his glass.

'I give you, in reply, the Sixty-Eighth Regiment, the Forty-Ninth Grenadier Division, Fourteenth Army, the Wehrmacht – and all their commanders, both gallant and otherwise.'

No one seemed to know what to make of this. Stempfe let out a muted hurrah and Schiffers tried to repeat the toast without much success. Buchner blew his nose again, and Sauer turned to see to the fire. Major Holmers showed nothing on his broad face. Young Huth just stood looking as he often did when listening to von List; remarkably puzzled.

At first it looked as if Colonel Clausitz was going to say some-

thing of an uncomplimentary nature; he opened his mouth twice, then he swallowed his imaginary bread-crumbs and ran his finger round the inside of his collar. Von List looked at him blandly.

'It's hot in here, Colonel.'

'I – I – ' Clausitz tugged at his collar again. Then, with an effort that must practically have killed him, Colonel Clausitz smiled.

'Upon my soul,' he said in a curiously choked voice. 'That was a most unusual toast.'

'These are unusual times, Colonel.'

Near them Schiffers and Stempfe were busily toasting anything they could think of.

'Final victory,' cried Stempfe, his glass like a golden flower on a waving stalk.

'Final victory, old comrade, and down with the peace-merchants!'

'Death to defeatists!'

'Certainly.'

'To the Reich, old comrade.'

'May it last a million years.'

'Of course.'

Buchner lay back on the sofa again. 'Amazing,' he said to the ceiling. 'Utterly amazing.'

Second-Lieutenant Huth buried himself in his sketch-book, trying vainly to stifle the pangs of envy brought on by the unwelcome thought of Dobermann's Iron Cross. Against his will the crayon pencil moved in savage little strokes across the paper as it brought Colonel Clausitz to cruel life. But before the drawing was complete he had to stop, for the Regimental Commander was leaving and required his car.

'It was Lieutenant Huth who decorated this room,' said von List, helping Clausitz into his coat.

'Indeed.' Clausitz did not sound very interested. 'Captain Schiffers, we are leaving. That is, if you have no objection.' With many expressions of mutual solidarity the two front-line comrades took leave of each other, giving each other firm handclasps as soldiers – and men – should.

Outside the two Colonels walked up and down in the snow, beyond earshot of the driver who waited by the car, stamping his feet and blowing bored, steamy breaths.

'A word in your ear,' said Clausitz, taking von List's elbow confidentially. The night was very clear and the cold pinched their nostrils with sharp fingers. The last crescent sliver of the old moon lay like a shining scimitar on the hard black sky, and as he listened to the rasping voice of the other man von List saw a shooting star plunge across the heavens to burn itself out after an inch of travel. That minute disturbance in the sky would bring

good luck to someone somewhere. Or that's what Ledi always maintained. But then she was full of funny little ideas about black cats and hares and seeing the first of the moon through glass.

'How would the thought of a few days' leave strike you?' He returned to the present with a jolt.

'Me? But I've only been here for two months. I'm not due for home leave. Anyway, I can't leave the battalion in the line.'

'Ah, but what if I was to tell you that there may be a week's leave for the whole battalion? This, of course, is for your ears alone, my dear fellow. It's far from certain. Naturally everything depends on the general situation.'

'Doesn't it always, Colonel?'

'Yes – well, as I was saying, there may – I only say may, mark you – be a week in Bologna for your battalion.'

'And the other battalions? What about Reiman and Stutz?'

'Naturally they will get leave in their turn,' said Clausitz. Their boots crunched on the hard snow. A long way off a gun fired, but only once, then it shut up, ashamed, like a man caught spitting in church, and among the frozen stars that of Bethlehem glittered like a jewel.

'I believe I met your most charming wife shortly before I came to Italy. She was dining with the Schwerins. You know them of course.'

'Of course.' The irony in the tone was lost on Colonel Clausitz who went on:

'A most delightful and, if I may say so, attractive woman.'

'I think so.' Von List came to a sudden halt. He disliked intensely being propelled about by his elbow. Clausitz let his arm fall; in his fur-collared greatcoat, with his head sunk deep into his shoulders and his great nose pointing at the snow, he resembled a sleeping vulture.

'Isn't she the daughter of Franz Rottendorp, the well-known industrialist?'

'Yes, Colonel, she is. And she has two brothers, both of whom elected to serve in the Waffen SS, as far as I know, with distinction.'

They resumed their promenade while the sound of the approaching Captain Schiffers became gradually louder.

'Herr Rottendorp controls a great – well, one could almost call it empire.'

'Yes, Colonel, one could. And after the war – provided, that is, he survives – his empire will undoubtedly be very much larger, for he deals in building materials. But I expect you knew that, Colonel.'

'Everyone in Germany has heard of the Rottendorp Building Company.'

'It even has branches in countries as far away as Brazil and East Africa.'

'So I had heard,' said Colonel Clausitz softly into his fur collar. Captain Schiffers had reached the door and the night rang loud with his jovial comments.

'Should' – Colonel Clausitz chose his words with care – 'should the course of the war take in any way an unfortunate turn – and we cannot blind ourselves to the fact that the most unpredictable and unpleasant events can occur in war – '

'Even one so excellently planned and carried out as this one,' agreed von List. The vulture nose thrust at him from the fur collar.

'I don't think I need say more,' said Clausitz.

'I don't think so, Colonel.'

Captain Schiffers had found his way to the car and was complaining shrilly to the wooden driver. 'Why the devil d'you keep moving the damned thing whenever I try to get in?' The driver stood strictly to attention as he had been taught to do when faced by any kind of officer, whether drunk or sober. 'Say something, man, say anything, prove you're alive. How do I know you aren't a dummy. Yes, a damned dummy. That's nice, I must say, driving about the lovely Italian countryside with a dummy. Well, it is lovely, you stuffed waxwork, it's damned lovely.' Supporting himself against the car Captain Schiffers began to sing about the Italian countryside, making up the words as he went along.

'What a boor,' said Clausitz contemptuously.

'My father visited Brazil shortly after the last war,' said von List. 'A remarkably beautiful country, he always said, rich with possibilities. Yes, I think my father-in-law was very sensible to expand his business there. Definitely a country for an active and energetic man,' he kicked playfully at a lump of snow in his path, 'in the prime of life.'

'And the stars shone bright, in the night of *I-I-Italy-y-y*,' sang Captain Schiffers, blowing out clouds of frosted breath.

'Think it over, my dear fellow,' said Clausitz. 'A few days at your home – I have always heard it was a very wonderful place – with your charming wife, I shall be only too delighted to grant you leave.'

'Thank you, Colonel. But I'm afraid it would take more than a few days even to get home. Besides, who knows the Russians won't get there first? They're becoming great travellers these days.'

Captain Schiffers was beating time to his song against the door of the car.

'You were in Russia, Colonel?'

'Yes.' The head sank even further into the fur. Then it suddenly shot up like an animal from its burrow. 'Schiffers! Be so good as to stop that horrible row and get into the car!'

Von List stood back and saluted as the driver, bad-tempered from his long, cold wait and having to endure Schiffers's alcoholic

insults, let in his clutch with a jerk that snapped the Captain's head almost from his shoulders.

'Think it over, my dear fellow,' repeated Colonel Clausitz, shouting above the roar of the engine as the powerful car shot away scattering snow, the pennant taut in the rushing air.

'Pity we can't all have Mercedes to go driving about in,' said Tomas from the doorway where he waited to speak to von List.

'Amazing the way some people get shoved up the ladder,' added the Sergeant-Major in such a bitter voice that von List looked round.

'Did you want me, Tomas?'

Tomas did not appear to have heard him.

'Throw away a whole bloody battalion. Leave six hundred men to Ivan and – '

'Sergeant-Major! I said, do you want me for anything?' Von List's voice had gone hard. Tomas tore his eyes from the direction of the departing car.

'Just to see if there was anything, Herr Oberst,' he said stiffly.

'No thank you.'

'With the Herr Oberst's permission I'll go to bed.' He turned on his heel.

'Tomas.'

'Herr Oberst?'

'I don't know what on earth you were hinting at just then, and I don't want to hear you talk like that again. Is that clear?' Tomas nodded silently.

'Whatever you know – or think you know – you will keep to yourself in future.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Oberst. And now, may I go?'

'Of course. Oh, and Tomas, one more thing.' The Sergeant-Major waited like a gigantic ramrod.

'A happy Christmas.' Von List held out his hand.

'And to you, sir,' said Tomas, holding out his own in answer.

Quartermaster Sauer had excelled himself to give the boys of Ziegler's Company a real treat on Christmas Night, producing such marvels as genuine meat soup with genuine dumplings; the flesh of a pig (caught by Corporal Wiederheim in front of his positions just as dawn broke) made up into very passable imitations of Mainzer Rippchen and Kesselfleisch; there was white bread, butter and a vast amount of jam. To wash down this great feast he had provided a veritable sea of schnapps, rum, vino and beer.

By the time that Lieutenant Colonel von List appeared in the tunnel where the festivities were taking place, bringing with him the two company officers, the noise was considerable, the smell of pork, lamp-oil, rank tobacco, beer and close-packed bodies quite overpowering. Lieutenant Dobermann wrinkled his straight

Nordic nose as he stepped inside from the clean, cold night air.

With a clatter Company Sergeant-Major Weber leapt to his feet, banging with his tin mug for silence and calling close on a hundred eager feeders to attention. The veins stood out on his massive neck as he roared out a short speech of welcome to the officers.

'Good evening, gentlemen,' said von List in answer. A few voices answered respectfully. He was very neat and tidy in his one presentable uniform, wearing all his decorations. Being the first time that most of the men had seen him in anything but his Russian trench-coat they gawped at him, especially at the shining *Ritterkreuz*, normally hidden behind the red scarf.

'Schulz has certainly gone to town on those boots,' called out someone already somewhat affected by Sauer's supply of alcohol. Close on a hundred pairs of eyes pointed unwinkingly at the Commanding Officer. But von List smiled gaily and said, 'He'll be delighted to know his efforts are appreciated,' with a courteous little bow in the direction of the voice. When the laughter had subsided Sergeant Telling got up and spoke.

'Owing to the mighty efforts of Lieutenant Sauer – '

'On whom one can build houses!' The interruption was enormously popular, being greeted with a gale of laughter and whistles. 'You can build houses on old Sauer.' That was one of the Quartermaster's favourite sayings. 'Don't be daft,' put in someone else. 'Tonight you could build the bloody Reichstag on him.'

'Owing to his efforts,' resumed Sergeant Telling, his one eye gleaming in the yellow, smoky light, 'we are able to entertain the Herr Oberst and our own two officers – ' more cheers and bangings – 'in a manner we hope they will enjoy.'

'Hear, hear.'

'That's the stuff, Sergeant.'

'Call me Goebbels!'

Von List held up his hands for silence.

'On behalf of Captain Ziegler, Lieutenant Dobermann, and myself, I should like to thank you, Sergeant-Major and you, Sergeant Telling, for your welcome to us. You can take that worried look off your face, Wedderkop. I'm not going to make a speech.' That's gone down well, thought Ziegler approvingly; he's good at remembering names.

'This is my first Christmas with you,' von List went on. 'And I have no intention of spoiling it by keeping you away from the main business of the evening which is on the tables before you. But I'd just like to say this.' He paused, letting his eyes move slowly down the two long tables, draped in curtains of various colours.

'God knows where we shall be next Christmas – '

'Home and tucked up in bed, Herr Oberst,' said Kalbach res-

pectfully, and the little dog sitting on the bench beside him gave a short bark. She was wearing a sort of little witch's hat made of black paper by Private Kumitsch.

'Trudi obviously agrees with that,' said von List, raising his voice above the joyful din. 'But let's hope it may be some place where we can forget the wonderful Italian scenery – ' A lot of men cheered. 'Especially our own pet mountain.'

'We'll never forget our mountain, sir.'

'He's right,' echoed Corporal Hufnagel. 'That bastard's like my dear old mother-in-law, God rest her wicked old soul. Once seen, never forgotten.'

'After the war,' announced Sergeant Blaun. 'I'm going to get myself a car and drive from Salerno to Bologna, just to see what everything looks like the other way round.' The top of his tunic was undone and his long chin smeared with gravy.

'What about the grocery business?' asked von List. 'Or is Telling going to look after the shop?'

'Telling will go with him, sir. They'll want to chatter about old times. Isn't that right, Sergeant? This is where I got my fiftieth Tommy. This is where I beat off eight counter-attacks – just me and my Schmeisser.' Close on a hundred mugs banged delightedly on the tables. Telling and Blaun were great ones for reminiscing.

'Don't forget a trailer for the vino and macaroni, Hellmut.' Von List smiled at the two officers beside him. Dobermann stood stiffly at ease, still very conscious of the Iron Cross on his broad chest.

'Unwind yourself, Dobermann,' said Ziegler. 'This isn't a State Funeral.' Once more von List held up his hand.

'*Guten Appetit*, gentlemen. And now, if we may, we'll join the party.'

Von List sat between Sergeant Telling and Corporal Hufnagel at the head of one of the tables. A large tooth-glass – considered more suitable for officers – was set before him, brimming with schnapps, and then a mountainous plate of pork, potato and gravy. A small Christmas tree stood in the centre of each table, garlanded with coloured paper, and Hindenburg lights burned among the few branches of withered oak scattered between the bottles and plates. The Company cooks bustled up and down with refills of pork.

At the opposite end of the table Captain Ziegler was already reducing his audience to rib-clutching laughter with his endless repertoire of bawdy stories. Von List wished he could feel more at ease. He took a long gulp at the schnapps, trying desperately not to splutter.

'That dog of yours, Kalbach, can she do any tricks?' He knew she could; Ziegler had told him.

'If she's in the mood, Herr Oberst.' Must it always be 'Herr

Oberst'? Even when they were enjoying themselves? Soon he would make his excuses and leave. Nothing worse than a corpse at a wedding for putting a brake on enjoyment. Kalbach cleared a space on the table.

'Now, Trudi, let's have a dance.' The little mongrel jumped on to the table and, standing on her hind legs, slowly pirouetted, clapping her paws and grinning. Kalbach rewarded her with a lump of meat as she took her applause with a wagging stump of tail.

'Death to Germany,' said Kalbach suddenly. She did not move.

'Death to the Tommies.' Trudi slowly lay down and rolled over on her side. Great cheering greeted this act.

'Final victory, Trudi.' She was up at once, dancing again. Her magnificent patriotism brought the house down.

'Wonderful,' said von List. 'It must have taken a long time to teach her.'

'Not too long, Herr Oberst. She's very intelligent.'

'The mongrels of this world are always the intelligent ones,' said Corporal Hufnagel, an enormous forkful poised *en route* to his mouth. 'Look at the Hufnagels now, grossly crossbred, filled with every kind of blood – ' With a modest little shrug he crammed his mouth full, splashing gravy on the new ribbon of his Iron Cross, Second Class.

'The Herr Oberst will have picked up some good stories during his travels,' said Telling hopefully.

'The trouble is the Herr Oberst can never remember them. And besides, the ones I can remember aren't really suitable for the children.' They liked that. He told his only story, mildly dirty, and they laughed, but not with the full-bellied roars that greeted Ziegler's jokes.

'Wedderkop's the story-teller,' said Telling.

'Yes, come on, tell us the one about the farmer with a pumpkin in his bed.' Wedderkop the Clown launched into a succession of excellent tales, all told with dead-pan face and in the lugubrious tones of a lawyer reading an extra juicy will. The young ones laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks, especially Kumitsch, who held his side, gasping and rocking backwards and forwards on the bench.

'Nothing shows a man's character more than what he laughs at,' remarked Wedderkop the Philosopher in a deep, mournful voice. 'You, I'm glad to see, are all men of great good taste.'

'You know your Goethe, Wedderkop.'

'Oh, he's a man of parts, sir,' explained Private Maulhard earnestly.

'I bet the girls go wild over some of them.' Corporal Hufnagel belched delicately behind his hand. Officers present; a certain measure of control must be exercised.

'Our Wedderkop's a poet as well as being the platoon's best rifle shot.'

'Trained by Hufnagel, Sergeant, don't forget that little item.' The irrepressible Corporal reached for a bottle, it did not matter what kind.

'But of course, Herr Hufnagel. Though how he achieves so many bulls with his eyes tight shut is not very clear to me. Perhaps that's also part of the Hufnagel method?' Telling removed the patch and wiped at the weeping socket. Von List listened happily to their nonsense without saying much. They plied him with food and drink but, seeing he was enjoying himself, they carried on in the thoroughly relaxed and uninhibited manner that should go with Christmas night out of the line. Looking down the long lines of flushed and beaming faces von List saw that Lieutenant Dobermann was unbending and allowing himself to become one of the boys. His face looks exactly like a ripe beetroot, von List smiled at the idea. Or perhaps it was more the sun glowing through morning fog.

The noise was increasing with every minute that passed. Here and there a man found it more comfortable to stretch his head on the table. Somewhere a voice was singing. The others gradually fell silent. A large man from Blaun's platoon was on his feet bawling out the verses of Lilli Marlene. Wedderkop joined in with his mouth organ.

'Wedderkop the Musician,' said von List to Sergeant Telling. But the latter did not hear, for the singer had a powerful voice and the lilting song of the Afrika Korps echoed and re-echoed from the tunnel roof.

> '. . . *Werd Ich bei der Paterne stehn,*
> *Wie einst Lilli Marlene,*
> *Wie einst Lilli Marlene.*'

'Blow the sand out of your ears, man,' shouted Telling, thumping with his mug. 'We had more to do in Russia than sit about singing round the camp-fire, eh, Hans?'

'That's right, Hellmut.'

'Ah, shut up!'

'Get the bloody snow off your boots!'

Bottles were tipping into mugs all over the place, like animals bending their heads to drink. A group of Afrika Korps veterans had begun to shout remarks to and fro.

'Listen to them, Hans. You'd think they were the only ones ever to have fired a musket. Put them in front of Joe Stalin's tanks and they'd soon learn what soldiering can be like. Remember the first time we met the K.52s?'

'The shells bounced off their bloody hides like hailstones.'

'But the Russkis had no tanks. Remember? Just a crowd of ignorant peasants. Remember? Roll along to Moscow in well-

sprung trucks. That was the idea, wasn't it, Herr Oberst?' Telling's eye flashed with cynical merriment.

'Something on those lines,' said von List.

'*Za rodinu, za Stalina!*' cried Blaun. 'For fatherland, for Stalin!' Both he and Telling enjoyed breaking into short phrases of Russian, mainly to show off before those who had never been east of Berlin.

'But Operation Barbarossa means something to us. Isn't that right, sir? We know what the bloody Cossacks can do.' Blaun tried to focus his spinning eyes on the Knight's Cross hanging below the quietly smiling face of the young colonel. But it was no use.

'*Nu kak dyela?*' asked his friend.

'*Nichevo*,' was the blurred answer. 'I'm done for.' Blaun's hand came out for a bottle, groping like a blind lobster.

'Tell us some more,' urged Kumitsch, grinning mischievously.

'Yes, come on, Sergeant,' squeaked Maulhard, dangerously excited by two mugfuls of vino. 'What about the Cossacks?'

'You don't want to listen to them, sir,' advised Hufnagel in a fatherly way. 'The war I'm in at the moment's quite enough for me without digging up a lot of stuff about old days. What are you drinking, Herr Oberst? Try the rum and wine, half and half, helps to wake up this Ity muck.' Except for a slight air of dishevelment and the gravy on his ribbon, Corporal Hufnagel showed no signs of wear. Von List, who had managed gradually to dispose of the schnapps – mostly on the floor – allowed his glass to be filled with the raw red wine.

'With your permission, Herr Oberst.'

'What is it, Hufnagel?'

'I should like to drink your health,' said the Corporal, sitting to attention.

'By all means.'

Corporal Hufnagel raised his tin mug with tremendous deliberation and slowly and steadily emptied the whole contents down his throat. Then with the same deliberation he wiped the back of his hand across his lips.

'It's not every day I sit next to a colonel with that hanging round his collar and – ' He stopped abruptly. The sweat broke out on his rough, lumpy face. 'If the Herr Oberst will excuse – ' He stumbled to his feet and made for the tunnel mouth at a shambling, weaving trot, amid shouts and jeers and much unfeeling mirth.

'Weak stomach,' said Telling. 'Always been his trouble. Put a bit of drink inside it and the thing plays up like a rocket launcher. Heh, Hans, listen, they're still at it down there.' Telling craned forward and shouted, 'Rommel isn't the only General in the Army, you half-wit! There are others, you know.' 'Worse luck,'

complained somebody from the shadowy smoky safety of the crowd.

'Another twenty years of this and we'll all be in striped pants.' A few faces turned towards von List to see how he was taking these outspoken jokes. Reassured by his expression they returned to the fun.

'Anyway, he's dead,' continued the desert man. 'But you can say what you like, all of you. When he was alive Rommel was the best bloody general we're likely to see.' The surrounding commotion was dying away as men turned their fuddled attention to the speaker, a small, wiry corporal in Number Three Platoon. 'And if you ask me – ' he began, but was interrupted by a loud, belligerent voice.

'They bloody well murdered him!'

If a grenade had gone off the shock in the tunnel could hardly have been more complete. Only those few snoring on the tables were unaffected. Von List looked into his glass. The voice had sounded uncomfortably like that of Corporal Jung. Just the sort of damn fool thing he would go and shout.

'What idiot went and shot his great mouth off like that?' Sergeant Telling muttered angrily. Heads were bowed over the beer and the wine and no one wanted to meet his neighbour's eye.

'Oh yes they did.' Von List could hear the hissing sounds of men trying to shut someone up. He rose to his feet.

'This is Christmas night,' he said very clearly, 'and we all want to enjoy it. I know I do. So I suggest we forget that remark. Alcohol often leads to small tactical errors. I know in my case it does. Beer, wine, schnapps and rum.' Von List shook his head in feigned sorrow.

'My friends,' he said in the uneasy fidgetting silence. 'With a mixture like that inside him a man might well say anything.' Heads raised themselves cautiously and turned towards him, hopeful that perhaps after all their evening wouldn't be spoilt and that nothing too unpleasant was about to happen.

'Who'll give us a song? There must be one opera singer among you, surely,' Sergeant Telling, looking up at him, thought to himself, he speaks quietly, he smiles at them quite gently, and yet he's got them, right there he's got them. How do they do it? Where do they keep the magic? Hell, I don't know. They're paid for it, aren't they? Why worry?

'I call on Lieutenant Dobermann to give us a song,' cried Captain Ziegler amid encouraging applause. On a night like this they were even prepared to like Dobermann. Iron Cross and all. Besides, they wanted to forget the awkward, dangerous moment which had erupted with frightening suddenness into their convivial evening.

'The Lieutenant has a fine baritone voice,' said Telling. 'Powerful too. No one snoozes when he's letting go.'

'Yes. A song.'

'What'll it be then?' shouted Ziegler.

' "We're Marching against England",' shrilled Maulhard in a girlish treble.

'You and your little gun?'

The laughter greeting this witticism told von List that all was well; they had regained their good form. All that is, except Lieutenant Dobermann, who sat, crimson in the face and bulging with indignation over that improper, no, by God, treasonable, remark. In his view there was no punishment bad enough for swine trying to sow the seeds of doubt and . . .

'They want you to sing, Lieutenant,' called Ziegler sharply He could see exactly what was wrong with Dobermann.

'A song. Let's have a song!'

Suggestions for suitable songs were bandied about. Some wanted a Christmas hymn, some a rousing, beer-swilling chorus, others yelled for smut. During all this carry-on, Dobermann wrestled with himself. But he was proud of his voice, and how stupid to deny it the right to be heard, simply owing to some drunken remark, and anyway, the C.O. had shown very definitely how he wished the matter to be treated. But from now on he would be watchful and ready to stamp out anything that smacked of criticism or unrest. A bloodhound wouldn't be hotter on the scent of loose and dangerous talk than he, Lieutenant Dobermann, Iron Cross, First Class.

'Give us "The Lüneburg Heath", sir.'

'No. "In the Field with Stone for Pillow",' cried Kumitsch.

'Yes. Yes.' They knew the song to be Ziegler's favourite.

Leaping to his feet like a huge blond puppy, Dobermann filled his lungs with air and sang. The words were sad and heavy with foreboding, and Dobermann rolled them out like some twilight god. Schnapps and rum trickled unchecked down many cheeks from brimming eyes. A lot of men joined in.

'We're a sentimental bunch,' muttered Telling, as the nostalgic words thundered about the tunnel.

'In a field with stone for pillow
Stretch I now my weary limbs!'

'Nothing like a bit of melancholy to get us Germans howling.'

But Sergeant Telling's words were drowned in the deafening climax. The applause was lusty, forgetting in the poignancy of the moment the various unsympathetic traits in the Lieutenant's character. Panting slightly he sat down with shining eyes, his fingers drawn unerringly to the cross on his breast as if to check it had not fallen off.

During the next song, a bawdy rendering by Corporal Wiederheim, von List took his leave. On the way out he had a short word with Sergeant-Major Weber. After thanking him for the

evening, he said:

'You might keep an eye on Corporal Jung and find him a corner where he can sleep off the worst effects of his friends' hospitality.'

'Yessir.' Weber was squinting slightly.

'See that he doesn't start yelling any more of his nonsense.'

'Yessir.'

' . . . she did what all men bade her,' yodelled Wiederheim, swaying dangerously on a table.

> 'And the General roared with might and main,
> Now, come on, do it once again!'

'May I drive with you, sir,' said Captain Ziegler. 'I feel in need of some cold air. They'll get on better without us. Look after them, Weber. Don't let anyone get hold of anything lethal. Reveille at dinner time. Tell Lieutenant Dobermann I'll be sleeping at Battalion.'

'Yessir.'

With a final bellow Wiederheim finished his song and fell off the table.

'Come along,' said von List. 'This is where we steal softly away.'

The little Fiat bounced erratically about the dark, pot-holed road.

'A shell landed just behind this car the other day, and since then the steering seems to have developed a will of its own.'

'I imagine you must be the only person other than himself the redoubtable Corporal Jung allows to drive this precious machine,' said Captain Ziegler. They bumped along without speaking. The sky was clouded and directly in front the towering shape of Monte Colle rose sharply silhouetted against the wide fan of allied searchlights. Otherwise the night showed no signs of war.

'It's certainly a help to the struggling driver,' said von List.

'Artificial moonlight. Artificial bosoms. Artificial babies. One day there'll be nothing real left.' The offside wheels slammed hard into a badly mended shell-hole.

'Sorry.'

'Even the hatred's artificial,' said Ziegler. 'If a bunch of Englishmen or Americans or Russians had arrived in the middle of the party tonight they'd have been received with joy. Everyone would have wept on everyone else's shoulders. Comrade. Buddy. Chum. Tovarich. They'd have sung themselves stupid and poured beer all over each other's uniforms. Then someone like you, or me, or Young-Germany Dobermann yells an order and they all start ripping each other to bits with bayonets. 'Artificial hatred,' he repeated, pleased with his little burst of philosophy.

'You're wrong, Ziegler,' said von List. 'The hatred's no longer artificial. In the old days perhaps, when war was the job of people like us, when the soldiers and sailors killed each other in a nice private sort of way and then shook hands, then perhaps it was artificial. But not now. During the last five years we've done enough to make the hatred very real, and to make it last, probably till long after our children are dead. We've made this the war of the civilised savage and tainted the skies of Europe with the filthy smoke of the ovens. And that is only too real, Ziegler.'

'Was it our fault?'

'Well, was it? Was it our fault?'

Captain Ziegler did not answer. Everything seemed amazingly clear to von List, as sharp as the mountain, *his* mountain, ahead. At that moment he felt there was nothing he couldn't do, no question he could not answer, and all with the most supreme confidence. With a racing car in his hands he could have beaten the world's best.

'Drink's a funny thing,' he said, enjoying the sudden beauty as the moonlight touched the mountain through a short break in the clouds. 'It turns one man into a raving beast, another into a drooling baby. Some curse, some sing, some just go quietly to sleep. Extraordinary. If anyone ever asked me to write a thesis, which, thank God, is most unlikely, I'd choose the subject of alcohol and its effects on *Homo sapiens* throughout the ages.'

'And the results of those effects,' said Ziegler. 'Look at Jung. He must have been bloody tight to say a thing like that.'

'*In vino* – I wonder how many more are thinking like that? Last night it was Simmering. And now this.'

'Of course, he's right,' said Ziegler. 'They caught up with Rommel in the end.'

'Like they catch up with most Germans who dare to raise their voices above a whisper.'

'There are no informers in this battalion, sir. I've certainly no Party Members in my company.'

'Jung could have found himself hanging on a hook for that remark.'

'With you and I each side of him like the two thieves, for not taking any action.' Ziegler's laugh was hard and mirthless.

'What about Dobermann? He didn't exactly look best pleased.'

'One thing in Dobermann's favour,' answered Ziegler. 'At least he's a soldier before anything else. He'll never disobey an order. I think he wants to be a General. No, Young Germany will burst with indignation, but he won't do anything to affect his chances of promotion.'

'When people ask me after the war what kept the German soldier going long after he was beaten, I'll say, two things, no, three things: discipline, ignorance, and fear. Fear for himself, for his family expecting the bang on the door.'

'You've forgotten one thing, sir. Courage.'

'Of course they've got courage. Disciplined courage. But when they start to think for themselves. What happens then? When at last they can't stand it any more and throw away their weapons and begin to slink home. What then, Ziegler? Not even Himmler has the resources to cope with that.'

'Then,' said Captain Ziegler, 'we are truly beaten. But not until then. And if we have to go down then I personally want to take as many of the Tommies with me as I can when I go. For what they are doing to Germany. You're right. This time the hatred is real – on both sides.'

They drew aside to let four ambulances go by. A scream from inside one of the bucketing vehicles was audible above the racket of the engines.

'God, it must be hell inside those things,' said von List with great feeling.

'Move over! Get that bloody little pisspot out of the way!' One of the drivers cursed from his open window.

'Whenever I get into this car someone seems to shout at me.' Von List let in the clutch and they went forward again.

'They were happy tonight,' he said. 'Really enjoying themselves. And tomorrow I may have to order them to chuck their lives away in some pointless action that won't even get beyond Division. I wish they realised how much I – .' He stopped.

'They do, sir,' said Ziegler. 'And as for me, you needn't lose any sleep over ordering me into anything. I know I shan't see the end of this business. I've always known that.' Von List had heard quite a few men speak like that, in exactly that same tone of voice: totally unworried, completely matter-of-fact. And not one of them still lived.

'The war might be ending at this moment,' he said. 'They may be signing a piece of paper whilst we drive along this attractive, moonlit road.'

'No, sir. I'm afraid not,' said Ziegler with unaccustomed seriousness. Then he laughed. 'They've got to wait for me to go.'

II

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL VON LIST was deathly tired; every wound in his body was aching and stabbing. For hours he never seemed to have been off the telephone or the wireless: to Simmering, to the gunners, to Colonel Clausitz. He sat back in his chair with a hand over his eyes.

'Coffee, Herr Oberst,' said one of the clerks.

'Put it down. Thank you.'

With the help of the guns and mortars, the British raid on Rommel Ridge had been beaten off, but the battalion still waited in its battle positions. The coffee tasted good. Beside him Captain Stempfe spoke on the telephone. Unshaven, the Adjutant looked even more unprepossessing than usual, blinking his tired red eyes as he nodded into the receiver, now and then jotting a note.

'Happy New Year, sir,' said Major Holmers as he came in. His skin was bluish from the dawn cold and the stubble very grey.

'I think it's over. They seem to have gone home.' He filled a mug and inhaled the thin, hot steam of the coffee.

'By God, I've been looking forward to this.' He removed his helmet. 'I'm afraid Simmering's been hit,' he said.

'Badly?'

'Bad enough to keep him out of it for the rest of the war. Shell splinters in the legs. Buchner's looking after him.'

'Who else?'

'Four dead; six wounded, one of them badly. Wedderkop, Tommy-gun bullet through the chest. God, it's a bloody weapon.'

'Wedderkop? I thought he was Number One.'

'He is. Transferred with two others to Number Three just for their spell on the Ridge.'

'In a way it's the best answer for Simmering,' von List said quietly. 'Though plenty of good men have cracked up far sooner – and with far less cause. But he'd never have admitted he was finished. Yes, Stempfe, what is it?' he asked absently.

'Captain Schiffers, sir. The Regimental Commander wants the latest information on the position, with special reference to casualties inflicted on the enemy.'

'Would you like to go out and count them, Stempfe?' snapped von List with unaccustomed sharpness.

'I beg your pardon, Herr Oberst!' The sheep's eyes goggled.

'Never mind, Stempfe. It's only my little joke.' Von List stifled a huge yawn. His body yearned rebelliously for rest. He got to his feet, knocking over the chair. In the old days he'd have been there, on the spot, fighting in company with his men, encouraging, organising, but now – now he was no more than a machine speaking into various mouthpieces; firmly and safely anchored to his chair, listening to the muted sounds of other men fighting. The night had given him a very minute inkling of what it must be like to command thousands of men, pushing them about the maps with such grand-sounding phrases as counter-offensive and closing-of-the-trap.

'If I'm needed I'll be in the Aid Post,' he said. 'Keep an eye on things this end, Holmers, till I'm back, then you can get some

sleep.' Even the word made him yawn. 'Nineteen-forty-five. I wonder what it'll bring to us, and to Germany?' Von List put on his cap and wound the scarf round his collar.

'Will you be wanting Corporal Halser, sir?'

The Headquarters corporal had somehow become the Colonel's unofficial bodyguard; no one had ordered him into the job; von List had certainly not asked for him. Sergeant-Major Tomas may of course have whispered a word. So that now, whenever von List went on his tours of inspection of the positions or drove in the little Fiat along the dangerous road to Regiment, Corporal Halser was there with his Schmeisser, as unobtrusive as any of the security shadows who stay close to royalty.

He needs looking after, Halser always said stoutly. You can think what you bloody well like, you suspicious sods, he would tell those who claimed he was doing it to put himself in the way of a possible decoration. For by now it was well known that Colonel von List would put himself into the most exposed and dangerous situations, almost as if he really enjoyed the song of shell-splinters. Besides, I like the man, he usually ended up, snorting belligerently. And as Corporal Halser was a large man very handy with his fists, that was the end of the conversation.

Von List took up the long stick he now carried to help him up the steep climbs.

'Not tonight,' he smiled. 'I think I can find my way from here to Herr Buchner's showroom on my own. Get those figures off to Regiment as soon as you can, Stempfe.'

'Yessir.' The Adjutant jumped to his feet, correct as ever.

'Don't you find it terribly tiring, all that bobbing up and down? Use your bottom whenever you can, Stempfe, that's what it's there for. Sit down, there's a good fellow.'

'You'll never get used to him, will you, Stempfe? You didn't think they existed like that, did you? I served under a commanding officer of very much this type on the Somme.' Major Holmers ran his hand across his clipped grey head. 'I must admit, Stempfe, I find that serving under this sort of man takes a lot of the unpleasantness out of soldiering in the line.'

'That may very well be,' said Stempfe coldly, returning with a kind of small shudder to his paper work.

After the angry racket of the night, this hour before the dawn – the first of a new year – was pretty quiet. Nothing stirred along the dark line of Rommel Ridge, where for hours the darkness had flowered and flashed with the red and yellow flames of war. The guns were silent, waiting with hot mouths for further orders; heavy machine-guns chattered in the mountains to the left. A cold mist hung between the little houses of Rocca San Michele, and above it the sentry's head moved like a round black float on the white sea.

'A noisy night,' said von List.

'What happened, Herr Oberst? Was it the big attack, or what?' The boy sounded very young.

'A raid, that's all.'

'But we beat them,' said the boy eagerly.

'Yes, I suppose we did. How long have you been at the front?'

'Three months, Herr Oberst. Three months and four days.'

To von List it seemed inconceivable that anyone could have known war for such a short time. 'Enjoy your breakfast,' he said, going on his way through the mist.

* * *

The same freezing mist clung to the few buildings of La Quercia, another little hamlet lying below a tall red viaduct, no more than – as the shell flew – two miles from Rocca San Michele.

Major Lumsden emerged from a doorway above which hung a damp Red Cross flag. There was a weary frown on his face; with him was his Sergeant-Major. They went on their way towards the leaking, patched-up house where they had their Company Headquarters.

'Ten men, Sergeant-Major. Ten men! And three of them dead. A pretty steep price, I'd have thought. What was achieved? We merely confirmed what we already knew, that this division opposite us has got some damned tough fighters in it. And skilled too. Good God, Sergeant-Major, d'you realise if they stay put in those positions the war in Italy might go on for months?'

'They're as good as any we've met so far,' agreed the Sergeant-Major.

'Why can't they go home? They must know the war's lost everywhere else.' The exhaustion in his voice made him sound almost peevish.

'Would we, sir? In the same circumstances, would we pack up and go home?'

'I hope not,' said the officer, 'I hope we wouldn't.'

'I mean, they're soldiers, sir, like we are.'

* * *

Medical Officer Buchner wiped his red hands down the long rubber apron. 'A bit different to a smart Berlin practice.' Removing the apron he handed it to the Medical Sergeant. 'Watch that one in number six, Eisner. Let me know as soon as he comes round.' The small hay barn taken over as Buchner's miniature hospital was excellently organised, with numbered cards over each of the dozen cots and the operating table – one of those from Signor Crespi's wine-shop – stood behind a screen of blankets, darkly stained by now with more than slopped wine. Sergeant Eisner and the orderly slept in one of the stalls, the one where Marielena's donkey had died in its summer straw hat. The lamps

still burned and the place reeked of ether and disinfectant.

'How's Captain Simmering?'

'In considerable pain but no danger.'

'And Wedderkop?'

'There's nothing more I can do.'

'Are you sending him back?'

'He'd be dead before they got the ambulance doors shut,' said Buchner, putting on his tunic. 'Let him die quietly.'

'The others?'

'The usual untidy results of exploding metal. One amputation. Left arm to the elbow. One of the children. That's him in the corner.' A waxen face turned and twisted on the pillow, moaning and whimpering. Buchner spoke in the hard, staccato tones of a man who feels deeply but is determined not to let it show. The orderly, in a blood-splashed white overall, came from behind the curtain with a large enamel pail. A dirty hand clutched the rim of the pail, almost as if something was trying to haul itself from the mass of swabs and red fragments by its bloody fingers. The smell that rose from the bucket made von List's mouth twitch. He went over to Captain Simmering.

'Well, so they've got you at last.' He smiled down at Simmering. That was just the kind of damned fool remark he used to hate.

'It's taken them a long time,' said Simmering, fighting the pain in his torn legs. 'But I'll soon be back, sir.'

'Don't be a complete idiot,' said von List. 'You know perfectly well you won't.'

'Yes,' said Simmering, 'I do know that.' He gave a great sigh of relief that ended in a short gasp of pain. His fists bunched on the blanket, and the sweat squeezed from his drained face.

'A pity it hurts quite so much,' he muttered from between clenched teeth. 'This rather takes away the rest-cure.' The man's agony was shocking to watch.

'Eisner!' Buchner held up his own arm, patting it close to the shoulder.

'I'll see you when all this is over,' said von List quietly. 'After the war. In Germany.'

'After the war,' whispered Simmering after Sergeant Eisner had slipped the needle skilfully into the taut skin.

'Then we'll have a good party, eh, Herr Oberst? Then we'll let them know how the First Battalion – how – how – ' The lids fluttered and dropped mercifully over the tortured eyes; the fists relaxed.

'With any luck he won't wake up till he reaches the base hospital,' said Buchner.

'No more war,' murmured Simmering drowsily. 'I'm sorry, but it's no more war – no more – ' Guns were firing, shaking the hard earth of the barn.

'Nothing to do with me any more,' said Captain Simmering quite loudly, his eyes rolling blankly, and drifted into unconsciousness.

'Remarkable stuff, morphia. I've shoved gallons of it into suffering humanity and never ceased to marvel at the result. In the old days, when first faced with some of the more spectacular effects of modern weapons on flesh and bone, I used to ask myself: Buchner, who needs it most, the semi-conscious victim or the sickened, shaken young doctor who's seen nothing worse than a burnt face or a difficult delivery? And the great advantage over alcohol is its complete brake on talkativeness. Perhaps I need a shot at the moment.' Buchner grinned. 'A night like this always loosens the tongue. It's the ether.'

'May I see Wedderkop?'

'Is he conscious, Eisner?' asked Buchner.

'Just about, Herr Doktor.'

Wedderkop was hovering in the No Man's Land that lies between life and death; the state in which a man is beyond pain, beyond fear, thankful to be safely on his way. But he recognised von List, smiling slightly with bloodless lips. Unable to raise his head from the pillow the dying man shook it weakly.

'Lie still,' said von List. 'How goes it, Wedderkop?'

'It doesn't hurt any more, sir.' Von List had to lean close to hear the whispered words.

'A bit of bad luck – ' He waited. Wedderkop's eyes slowly closed and the breath gurgled in his throat. Von List thought he had gone.

' – being sent to Number Three Company.'

Buchner wiped the sweat from the sunken face, already the shining skull of a dead man.

'Tell my mother – ' the voice trailed away. 'Yes?' The awful liquid sounds turned to a thick wheezing, then cleared as the blood rose from his torn lungs and stained the pillow in a sudden scarlet flood. He choked and spluttered.

'Tell her to watch out for that indigestion of hers – ' Another terrible pause while he fought death for the right to say a few more words. The Clown peeped through the waxen mask. 'It'll be the death of her, one of these days.' Wedderkop bared his red teeth in a ghastly grin.

'Open the second shutter – ' began the Poet, but his voice failed.

'So that more light can come in. Is that it, Wedderkop?' The skull nodded.

'Herr Oberst?'

'Yes.'

'With your permission – may I – the *Ritterkreuz* – .' The light was fading from his eyes. With swift movements von List took the Knight's Cross from his throat and put it in Wedderkop's

hand. The fingers closed weakly round the little jewelled cross.

'With respect, sir – the lads – they think a lot of – ' Blood cut off the rest.

'He's trying to say something else,' said Buchner. Von List bent down very close to the struggling mouth. The words came as though breathed down a long dark tunnel. 'Tell Kalbach – tell him – to keep – to keep the mouth-organ, tell him – ' This time the pause was for ever.

'He's dead,' said Buchner, straightening up.

Von List removed the cross from the clinging fingers, stared at it for a long moment and put it in his pocket.

'He looks quite young again,' he said. 'Only eighteen, and yet I've seen very few men die better than that.' Buchner did not answer. But outside he asked:

'Is that all we expect from the youth of Germany? That they should die well?'

They were walking slowly. The mist had dissolved and the first sunlight of the new year lay along the grey spine of Rommel Ridge.

'You're right, Buchner. You're quite right.'

'How much longer, sir?' said Medical Officer Buchner wearily.

And in answer a big shell curved lazily across the sky to begin the work of yet another day.

12

THEY buried Private Wedderkop that morning, putting him into the iron ground with considerable effort, having to use explosive to open the frozen earth – another of war's little ironies. Chaplain Maulhard read from his prayer-book; a volley was fired above the blanketed shape into the hard blue sky; the solid lumps of soil fell heavily on Wedderkop's body as the sun struck diamond light from the snow-peaks. A battery of *Nebelwerfers* opened fire during von List's short address, drowning his words with the strange moaning sound of their flight.

Back at his table he wrote a letter to Wedderkop's next-of-kin: a doting mother and a proud father who had lost an arm in the March offensive of 1918.

' . . . I deeply regret to inform you that your son . . . ' Son, brother, father, lover – it was always the same. He could have written the words in his sleep. ' . . . on the field of honour . . . for Führer and Reich . . . true to his oath of service . . . in undying memory.' Von List threw down his pen in disgust. He felt

thoroughly depressed. For some reason Wedderkop's death had upset him. He had seen many men die, but this boy – Perhaps that was it: he'd watched too many die.

Sergeant-Major Tomas came in clutching a bundle of mail, most of which he gave to the Adjutant.

'One for you, sir.' Von List took the letter, turning it over in his hand, savouring the moment. Then he put it down unopened.

'And for you, sir.' Captain Stempfe ripped his open at once. Von List tried to concentrate on his message of condolence; tried to bring some real feeling to the stereotyped phrases . . . 'I can only add my own deep sympathy which I send . . . '

'Good gracious,' exclaimed Stempfe in great surprise. 'Well I never – ' Damn the man! Von List scored out the last sentence, then scrunched the paper into a tight ball. Stempfe was grinning to himself, now and then he chuckled.

Von List took a fresh sheet of paper and began again, this time in his own words . . . 'I am afraid I have some very sad news . . . ' Every so often his eyes strayed to his wife's letter. The first mail for close on a fortnight and yet he could leave it unopened. Extraordinary self-control, thought Holmers who was getting the battle-map up to date. He changed the little flag of Number Two Company to the reserve position.

'Excuse me, sir, but have you decided about Number Three?'

'Just a minute,' said von List. He signed his name, read it through, closed the envelope and passed it to the Adjutant.

'Wedderkop's family. Have it addressed and get it off tonight without fail.'

Stempfe broke off in mid-chuckle. 'Of course, Herr Oberst.' His long sheep's face was still grinning inanely. 'Who'd have thought it?' he kept repeating.

'I think we'd better give Number Three to Huth,' said von List, holding Ledi's letter in his hand. 'Though technically speaking I suppose it should be Dobermann,' he went on doubtfully. 'Have you got their confidential files, Stempfe?'

The Adjutant shouted for Sergeant Bloch down the telephone. 'Officers' files. Lieutenants Dobermann and Huth.' Before they were brought in, Captain Ziegler arrived.

'Ah, just the man.' Von List smiled warmly. 'What's brought you off the hill, Ziegler?'

'Bored with the view, sir. A sudden need for intellectual conversation. No. I looked in to see Simmering, but Buchner's put him out for the count.' They talked about Simmering and Wedderkop and the night's excitement for a bit, then various routine matters connected with day to day defensive warfare.

'There's a rumour going about the company that we may be getting leave. Is there anything in it, sir?' Ziegler looked thinner and blacker than ever with a week's growth of beard on his face.

'It's amazing,' said von List. 'You know, I really believe if the Führer was to dream up another secret weapon, the details would be round this battalion within a couple of hours. Yes, there is a chance of a few days out of the line. In fact, I was going to see all company commanders this evening. Sixteen thirty, make a note of it, Stempfe, and inform those concerned.' Captain Stempfe was no longer grinning. That remark about the Führer: extremely poor taste. The Orderly Room Sergeant entered with the files.

'Give them to Major Holmers, please. Talking of company commanders, Ziegler, what d'you think of Lieutenant Dobermann's ability to take over a company?'

Ziegler thought for a minute. Von List tried to make out the postmark on his letter. Looked like Munich. That means she must be at her father's hunting lodge in the Bavarian Alps. He looked at the map on the wall. In a straight line, not more than two hundred miles, perhaps two fifty. Posted six days before. Six days! Suddenly he could hardly keep his fingers from tearing it open. Mastering his impatience he listened to Captain Ziegler.

'Dobermann's a very efficient officer,' he said slowly.

'And a very brave one,' added Stempfe quite unnecessarily.

'Yes, and a brave one. But that doesn't automatically qualify him to take over a company. The bit of hardware pinned to his tunic certainly hasn't done anything to lessen the size of his head.'

'In fact, Ziegler, you don't think he is the man?'

'Well no, I don't, sir.'

'I see.'

'You surely aren't suggesting that Lieutenant Dobermann is incapable of – '

Ziegler interrupted the Adjutant curtly, 'I never said incapable. But he's not particularly handy with the men. He gets their backs up. Surprisingly enough men like Telling and Blaun don't take kindly to being treated as if they were first week recruits. That's my opinion, sir.'

'He passed out top of his Cadet School,' said Holmers. 'But then, on the other hand Lieutenant Huth is senior,' he added dryly. 'By exactly four days.' Their attention was drawn to Captain Stempfe, who made a loud and angry noise into his handkerchief. He did not like Huth; the man made him feel uncomfortable. Ever since the regrettable business of that damned Italian bitch – the Adjutant felt himself burning at the memory.

'Lieutenant Dobermann's father is a Party Member,' he said, as though slapping down an ace. 'An *Ortsgruppenleiter*, I believe.'

After a short pause von List spoke, using his most silky voice: 'I'm afraid I can't quite see what that has to do with the problem under discussion.'

'It's only that – well, he could possibly make things awkward –' Stempfe's defiant little mutterings tailed off.

'Awkward, Captain Stempfe? Awkward? If he was Himmler's eldest and favourite son it wouldn't make the slightest difference.' Even as he said the words von List wondered wryly if they were in fact strictly true. What an unattractive little man, he thought, glancing at the Adjutant. By God, I'd like to get rid of him. But he's perfectly competent; that's the devil of it. Does his job well enough, enjoys burrowing about in paper. Besides, you put up with what you had these days, for there was no one else. He stood up, as he always did when he reached a decision.

'Very well then. Lieutenant Dobermann will remain with you, Ziegler. Lieutenant Huth will take over command of Number Three Company as from the moment they come back into reserve. Which is when, Holmers?'

'Tomorrow night, sir.'

'Good. Right. I'll see Huth this afternoon.' Doing something concrete and, he hoped, constructive, he felt much better; the depression born of fatigue and death had lifted – and now he would creep away by himself for a while and read his wife's letter.

'I think I shall get a couple of hours' sleep,' he said, challenging them with his firm, smiling words to raise any more problems.

When he reached his room he found Private Schulz waiting expectantly by the bed.

'I'm going to sleep, Schulz. Call me in two hours with some hot water.' Von List fingered his bristled chin. That was bad. In the old days he'd have shaved first thing, whatever the night had been like. That was their pride. Use muddy water, dirty snow, blood if need be, they used to joke – but shave. He sighed, sitting heavily on the bed. In the old days he hadn't got so damned tired so easily.

'In two hours, Herr Oberst. With shaving water. Very good, sir.'

'Schulz.'

'Sir?'

'Have you ever been to Bavaria?'

'No, Herr Oberst. Never.' Shulz wondered stolidly what was coming next. A man never knew with this strange officer.

'It's very beautiful. The mountains aren't spoilt by shells and bullets and barbed wire. You ought to go there one day, Schulz.'

'Yes, Herr Oberst.' Suddenly his fair Saxon skin blushed pink. 'My girl is Bavarian. She comes from Oberammergau. Last year she had a part in the Passion Play. We are going to be married after the war. If it's ever over,' he added with unexpected bitterness. For a moment the dumb and stolid mask had cracked.

'When the war's over you'll be able to watch her in the play,' said von List soothingly. But Private Schulz seemed in a state of confusion after his little outburst.

'I beg the Herr Oberst's pardon,' he stammered. 'I – '

'What the devil for, Schulz?' demanded von List angrily. 'Aren't Germans allowed to talk to each other any more? Great Heavens, Schulz, what d'you think I am? Some sort of little tin god, or what? That's what's wrong with us, we've all become a pack of stuffed dummies, wound-up parrots spouting a lot of nonsense that's been fed into us like spaghetti – ' Von List stopped the angry flow and smiled at the startled Schulz, standing rigid and round-eyed. 'Don't worry. I haven't gone off my head.'

'No, Herr Oberst.'

'Perhaps when all this stupidity's over you'll be able to get me two tickets for this play.'

'Oh yes, Herr Oberst. Of course.' Schulz's voice was pathetically eager.

After the orderly had gone, von List lay down, still in his Russian coat. Stupidity! He who'd been brought up on the milk of war, the noble profession of arms, the myth of German invincibility. He who had entered the war with a martial song in his heart, bent on avenging the defeat of his father's generation. Karl von List, descendant of a fighting family, holder of the Knight's Cross with Swords and Diamonds – Stupidity! Nonsense! Smiling in a surprised sort of way, he opened Ledi's letter.

When he had finished he was still smiling, but no longer surprised. He took up her picture and looked at it for a long time; then he re-read parts of the letter.

' . . . the unbelievable peace of this place after Hanover . . . in the daytime it's the Americans, at nights the British and, my goodness they are the worst . . . Poor Mother. She's still terribly shocked by Siggie's death. It's hard to take in that we shall never see him again. Thank God, my darling, that you aren't in Russia . . . ' Sigismund's death would have hit them hard. The favourite son. Now lying somewhere in the vast Russian graveyard. On the field of honour . . . In undying memory . . . He opened his eyes and continued reading, returning to the sentences underlined. She was a great one for underlining her childish writing, he thought fondly. 'We are here for the whole of January. As you are . . . ' the next words were carefully scored out. But, knowing her, she'd have been poring over an atlas. And in the atlas, Italy would have looked wonderfully near. ' . . . I know it's pointless asking you to take care of yourself, sweetheart. As soon ask a moth to stay away from a flame. Not very original I know, but it is very late and I really must stop, especially as Walter is cutting his teeth and complaining a lot . . . God bless you, my dearest, and bring you home to me very soon.'

No complaints from her; no dreary reminders of the civilians' dangers and privations, very much worse than what he was suffering on this placid front. Burn her at the stake and Ledi wouldn't complain; she'd be more worried about the executioner getting smoke in his eyes.

Just before the letter fluttered from his hand von List had made another decision. Then, curling himself up under the blanket, he slept.

When Lieutenant Huth left his Commanding Officer he was in such a state of excitement as to be almost delirious. For now at last his dreams were realised. From tomorrow night he would be in command of a company in the line. Colonel von List's words rushed to and fro in his mind like the little flames of a grass-fire. Come what might, he'd prove himself worthy of the trust placed in him. Already he was squaring his sturdy shoulders to carry this sudden proud weight. When he thought of Dobermann's face he could hardly stop himself laughing aloud as he marched swiftly to inform Sergeant Weismuller that he would be assuming control of the Defence Platoon. Not that Huth had in any way a spiteful character; it was just that Herr Dobermann had been asking for something like this with his clumsy jokes about pulling one's weight, and, in a way, it would help to cancel out the Iron Cross.

'He'll do it all right,' said Major Holmers. 'This is what he's been longing for ever since the day he put on uniform. When he first arrived and was given the Defence Platoon he was in and out of here like a worried rabbit, applying to go to a company.'

'One thing, he's got a good Sergeant-Major in Heim. No, I've no fears about Huth. You know, it amazes me somehow, after the losses we've had, how the Huths, yes, and the Dobermanns still keep appearing. Rolling off the production lines. Doesn't it seem rather a shame to you that they should all be swallowed up by a war that's long since outstayed its welcome?'

'Yes,' said Holmers simply. 'It does.' They were alone, the Adjutant being occupied in some affair of ill-discipline among the cooks.

'If you like, Holmers, you could take a few days' leave to Germany,' said von List after a short silence.

'Leave? What would I do with leave?' Spend long uncomfortable hours in trucks and trains; one day, perhaps two, listening to his sister's endless complaints about the state of her liver or her disagreeable stomach, then back into the train. 'Thank you all the same,' said Holmers. 'But I've got out of the habit of sleeping at home.'

'Friederichshafen. It isn't the North Pole. Roughly a hundred miles from the Brenner. The journey couldn't take much more than twenty-four hours, at the outside.' Von List tried very hard

to make his tone convincing. 'You've earned it, Holmers.' He waited, smiling to disguise his sudden acute apprehension.

Major Holmers shook his head slowly.

'Don't worry. I'll take things easy in Bologna.' He paused. 'Of course, it won't take the two of us to keep an eye on the battalion. So should the Commanding Officer be thinking of – '

'Thank you, Holmers,' said von List very gratefully. He let out a long sigh. 'I must admit I've been rather dreading this moment.'

'Don't misunderstand my motives,' chuckled Holmers. 'If I had half what you have to go back to I would have accepted your offer without any hesitation at all.' His eyes were sad. 'If you'll allow me to say it, sir, you're a very fortunate man.' Major Holmers spoke from his heart.

'Yes, Holmers, I am.'

'War is for people like me. Men without roots, without ties.' He spoke entirely without self-pity; merely stating facts. 'It's a game for those who don't have to be looking over their shoulders all the time, for men without the worry of wives and children. For in time that will sap their strength and diminish their professional skill.'

'The only men who should still be in the ring are those who enjoy the game. And there are such people, even now. Look at Dobermann, Huth.'

'Too young to have learnt.'

'What about Ziegler then? You can't tell me he doesn't enjoy fighting. A man like that will be lost without a war. Telling. Blaun. Professionals. They know nothing else, they've done nothing else but kill, and dodge bullets, pretty well since their voices broke. Can you really see them settling down to serve packets of sugar in a grocery shop?' Von List laughed aloud at the thought.

'People can say what they like, Holmers, but there's no doubt a great number of men take to war not only with zeal but with very real enjoyment. And that doesn't mean they are all cold-blooded killers either. There was a time, unbelievable though it seems now, when I was happy at the front. But that was in the good old days of advance and conquer.'

'Champagne and flags and *Deutschland über Alles*. I remember the feeling well. Until the Somme.'

'In my case a few months in Russia.'

They sat, wrapped in memory, vaguely hearing Captain Stempfe lecturing one of the clerks next door.

'If we can't win the game,' said von List slowly, 'at least we can still make our opponent sweat for his victory.'

'Yes,' said Major Holmers, equally slowly. 'Yes, I suppose we can still do that.'

The four company commanders received the news of leave with the cautious air of men who'll believe it when they see it. All except Lieutenant Huth, a veritable dynamo of eagerness and efficiency, yet very conscious of his position in respect of the other three much decorated and many times wounded officers.

'May I tell the men of my company' – at this point he swelled visibly – 'that there will be sleeping-out passes granted during our time in Bologna?'

'You may,' said the Colonel. When faced by Lieutenant Huth he felt about a hundred.

Huth asked a succession of questions, writing the answers in his notebook, watched by the others with varying degrees of tolerance, amusement and impatience.

'You did say we'd be billeted in a school, didn't you, sir?'

'I did. Not more than a mile from the centre of the city, so it shouldn't be too difficult for men with the use of their legs to reach some sort of pleasure.' Lieutenant Roske made a noise that might have been *a-a-aaah*.

'I leave it to you,' continued von List, 'to see that a high standard of smartness, or rather, as high as it can be with the uniforms as they are, is maintained. Naturally you can allow a certain latitude over minor infringements; God knows, they get little enough relaxation, but I insist on all cases of drunkenness in public being punished with the very maximum severity. Is that clear, gentlemen?'

'Yes, sir,' they chorused obediently. Huth wrote steadily.

'I imagine that the Italians no longer regard us as the all-conquering Master Race – ' Huth's pencil halted in mid-sentence. 'But that's no reason why we, or anyway the men of the First Battalion, should go round behaving like some sort of broken rabble.' His eyes regarded them each in turn, slowly and steadily.

Major Holmers gave out more details of dates; the preliminary orders for the hand-over to the Third Battalion, the route to Bologna, and so on.

'None of this to go beyond this room, of course,' said von List. He wondered if he should tell them he was intending to return to Germany. Later, he decided. Not that any of them would grudge him a few days with his family.

'About the question of fraternisation, Herr Oberst,' queried Huth as they were getting ready to leave.

'Fraternisation?' Von List stared at the keen young officer in utter amazement.

'Yes, sir. Has the Herr Oberst any views on how – ?'

This time Lieutenant Roske's comment was quite clear. 'Behave like a rabbit, Huth. Let instinct guide you.' Roske was a commissioned edition of Corporal Hufnagel. His wide grin was most infectious.

'Technically,' said von List smiling, 'the good citizens of Bologna are still our heroic allies and as such can be fraternised with in any way short of murder, theft or rape.' He turned to Roske.

'I'd rather you didn't put this rabbit theory of yours into the receptive minds of your company.'

The little conference broke up in laughing good humour, as did so many presided over by Colonel von List.

'Fraternisation,' said Major Holmers after the four officers had departed. 'These youngsters are amazing. Incredible.'

'I suppose quite a number of the men have made friends with Italian families,' said von List. 'Real friends I mean. Not just ships touching in the night.'

'Yes,' said Major Holmers. 'In some cases I think they may come back after the war and marry in Italy. What d'you think, Stempfe?'

The Adjutant's pale face coloured slightly as he replied.

'I think it very likely, sir. This is not an occupied country,' he said woodenly.

'No,' said von List with a small note of interrogation in his voice.

'Herr Stempfe always looks remarkably uncomfortable at any mention of Italians,' he said to Holmers as they made their way to the officers' quarters.

'I believe there was something to do with a girl when he was here on the advance party. Made a fool of him in some way.'

'I don't wonder. Poor Stempfe. They always will.' A whole crowd of machine-guns broke into agitated chattering over to the left.

'They must get through millions of rounds,' observed von List. 'I wonder if I should have mentioned about my trip to Germany?'

'Why? You're not responsible to them for your every movement, sir.'

'Are you sure, Holmers? Perhaps I am.' Mortars were joining the chorus. 'Perhaps I am.'

13

ASSISTED and hidden by a thick snowstorm, the change-over was affected without casualties, the First Battalion going back to temporary billets in a village not far from Regimental Headquarters, and the men of the Third Battalion, 69th Regiment,

moving into the unfamiliar positions on Monte Colle and Rommel Ridge.

'See you back on the fifteenth,' said Colonel Hasse, the tubby little commander of the Sixty-Ninth, who had driven forward to see his men installed.

On the dot, Colonel,' said von List.

'You'll find the knives well sharpened,' Medical Officer Buchner assured his opposite number.

'Don't strip all the fleshpots down to the bone,' said the company commander relieving Lieutenant Huth. 'Leave a few garments for us to take off.'

Quartermaster Sauer was waiting with a hot meal when the companies arrived plastered in snow, liberal helpings of straw in the barns and outhouses and a tot of rum for each man.

'The man's a bloody miracle,' they admitted grudgingly, never falling over themselves to give too much credit to any sort of officer. Rolling themselves in their greatcoats and blankets, they slept and dreamed of their approaching week's freedom from war.

Next day they washed as best they could with Sauer's supply of hot water; they put on fresh socks and scraped the dirt from their boots and uniform, the black stubble from their faces leaving half-moons of pale skin in contrast to the reddened, weathered cheeks and noses. It had to be Runz who brought an alarming crop of rumours back to Number One Company from the battalion barber.

'You're like a bloody bluebottle, Runz,' said Corporal Hufnagel, digging out his black nails with the point of his trenchknife. 'Buzz, buzz, buzz. So we're off to Russia, are we? Special invitation from Koniev to spend our leave with him at his country *dacha*, I suppose?'

'I'd rather swing than Russia again.' Corporal Wiederheim rubbed at his belt with a dirty handkerchief.

'I heard one of the Headquarters Company sergeants say the leave may be cancelled,' said Runz, not to be done out of his moment of drama.

'So it may,' said Sergeant Telling. 'It's happened before.'

'Leave's a privilege, not a right,' announced someone pompously, imitating an officer.

'Get us half way to Bologna then, about turn, men, and march us straight back again.'

'The S.S. are taking over the whole of this bit of the line. We're being sent to the Western Front.'

'They need some proper soldiers there by all accounts.'

'To hell with the S.S. Those cocky swine think the sun shines out of their navels and backsides. I know what I'd do if I was in charge.' Hufnagel drew his thumb across the knife-blade.

'They've moved into the Vergate positions,' said Runz, deter-

mined to be right about something.

'Good luck to them. A man from the Sixty-Ninth was saying the bunkers leak and most of the forward posts are knee-deep in water half the time.'

'They'll find that a bit different from shooting-up Russian civilians,' growled Sergeant Blaun. 'Eh, Hellmut?'

'In towns we'd fought our guts out to capture,' said Hellmut Telling, cleaning dried mud off his eye-patch. The hole where his eye had been seemed to stretch right back into his head.

'Have neither of you comics ever killed a civvy?' inquired Sergeant Krause with some derision.

'That's different,' said Blaun and Telling almost as one.

'It always is,' commented Krause dryly. 'Orders, I suppose? Same with the S.S. boys. Only difference is, their orders are on a bigger scale, that's all.'

'What's all the sweat,' put in Hufnagel. 'Getting pretty choosy in our old age, aren't we? Or are some of our consciences beginning to catch up a bit?' He laughed unpleasantly. 'Now that the bloody war looks like ending off we go to confession and that's us scrubbed and ready for the next chapter. You want your bloody brains washing out, you lot. Thousands of German civilians roasted every night and we're all – '

'The ethics of war can wait, Hufnagel,' interrupted Telling in a loud, firm voice, nodding warningly towards where Private Kumitsch sat quietly cleaning his kit, slightly apart.

'What are you going to do in Bologna, Kalbach?' called Maulhard in his piping voice. 'Go off on your own like last time?'

'He won't take you with him, Pastor,' laughed someone. 'He doesn't want competition, not where he goes. Look at him, he's gone red as a bloody beetroot.'

'No competition for Kalbach!'

'What about Trudi? Is she allowed to go along?' The little dog stirred in the straw at the sound of her name.

'D'you blindfold her, Kalbach?'

'Cruelty to dumb animals, that's what it is. Making her watch. Shame on you, little man.'

'Enough to drive a bitch off her nut.'

'Perhaps there's a dog for her.'

So they chaffed and laughed and tried to wipe out Hufnagel's remark, for they all knew why Kumitsch was going home. A fine time to go back as a hero with a battle scar on your face, thought Corporal Wiederheim. By God, but it was a rotten sort of war. He had lost his wife and both children two years before, buried under tons of rubble in Hamburg, but he could still feel something of his previous kind-hearted understanding, though Hufnagel's words hadn't bothered him.

'Heroes go by first-class sleeper, Kumitsch,' he said with a rough attempt at encouragement. 'Waited on by the General

Staff.' Kumitsch smiled gratefully but said nothing.

'When you get back,' said Hufnagel, 'we'll have another little Tommy officer all ready and waiting for you.' Kumitsch smiled again, saying, 'Thank you, Corporal,' for he understood Hufnagel's type of apology. An unidentified voice steered the conversation on to the subject of women, which was where most of them wanted it. Very happily they bandied ideas about the large, lamplit barn.

'Let me loose among the League of German Girls,' cried Hufnagel happily above the general babel of voices, 'and the Reich will find itself saddled with another load of likely cannon-fodder, I can guarantee that. Oh, I'd murder them. I'd tear them apart.' He cupped his grubby hands and squeezed as though pressing juice from a couple of oranges, with a look of extreme bliss passing slowly across his craggy face. 'Oh, my darlings, let Hufnagel make you jump and dance!'

'Why wait for German girls,' asked a voice unpatriotically. 'What's wrong with the Italian ones? They're made the same way.'

They let themselves go, for they were contented, their morale was high, and not one of them, in his heart of hearts, could really believe that their leave would not start properly within a few hours when they formed up for the march to Bologna.

The officers were quartered in what had been the church before shell-fire removed the steeple and person or persons unknown had looted the few objects of value accumulated by three generations of village priests. They too discussed the coming days in Bologna. Captain Ziegler knew what he was going to do. 'Sleep,' he said. 'Wake up now and then for a drink, then more sleep.'

'Not alone, eh?' Captain Stempfe hinted wickedly at what he'd like to do. 'To sleep alone is no sort of reward for a man out of the line.' He was looking tremendously military and efficient, already festooned in his marching order, even though they were not expecting to move off for at least another hour. As usual, Stempfe, by what he left unsaid, brought it home to his listeners what a hell of a fellow he was.

Lieutenant Huth came in from inspecting his company prior to marching off.

'What of the night?' sang out Roske from where he lay cosily in a pew studying one of his many lurid magazines. 'Still snowing?'

'Nothing much,' said Huth, brushing the frozen flakes from his coat. 'Enough to hide the moon.'

'We should reach Bologna by four, that is, allowing three hours on the road, plus unscheduled halts en route – yes, three hours should do it.' Captain Stempfe eased the chin-strap of his helmet (worn at all times with full order) that was cutting unpleasantly

into his long chin.

'What's the latest on time of parade?' Ziegler threw a plank on to the smoking open fire burning in the aisle.

'0100 hours, put back from the original time of midnight,' said the Adjutant, sounding like a railway time-table. Huth regarded him with dislike. Ever since they'd been on the advance party together he had disliked Stempfe. For one thing, he could never rid himself of the deeply-felt suspicion that the sudden departure of the Crespis had been something to do with Stempfe. And that donkey; eaten by the defence platoon, it had been shot by a pistol, or that's what the platoon cook had sworn. 'If that bloody donkey was knocked off by a bomb than I shouldn't be in the soldiering business': that's what he'd said. As he so often did, Lieutenant Huth sat remembering Marielena Crespi while Stempfe strode up and down the aisle, his boot plates ringing on the stone and his map case swinging boldly. Huth shook himself free of memory and reached for his pad. The Warrior's Vigil, he thought, smiling to himself.

Other officers drifted in to warm themselves at the fire or fortify their cold bodies at Corporal Leiser's little bar, set up on a packing case by the blanketed door.

'The road's still jammed with supply trains and artillery trucks. We'd never get through in a month of Sundays.' Dobermann walked like a huge ballet dancer, his boots heavily balled with packed snow. He removed his greatcoat; he always did, whatever the cold, for he still enjoyed very much indeed glancing down at his Iron Cross.

'Grappa, sir? Brandy? Schnapps? Benedictine?' Corporal Leiser was good enough for the Ritz.

'I suppose we shall all behave like beasts once we get back to civilization,' said Medical Officer Buchner, licking his lips.

'Speak for yourself, Buchner,' answered von List from the door. At the appearance of the Colonel, the officers got to their feet.

'Conserve your energy, gentlemen. We've a slow journey in front of us.' He removed his cap and limped slightly as he walked slowly towards the broken altar.

'Still, it's in the right direction,' said Ziegler. 'A drink for the Colonel, Leiser. What'll it be, sir?'

'I'll take a glass of your excellent brandy, Corporal Leiser, thank you.' He turned to face his small congregation, looking at them in silence as they sprawled in the pews waiting expectantly. Huth started on a clean sheet. Framed by the oily lamps on the altar, von List might have been a priest in battle vestments about to exhort his followers in the name of one God to perform mighty deeds and slay those of another God in their thousands without mercy. But all he said was:

'The battalion will be ready to march off within half an hour.

See to it, Captain Stempfe.' With a terrific stamping and throwing up of arms and clatter of boots, the Adjutant removed himself. God knows, thought von List watching the noisy charade, I've seen plenty of desecrated churches: filled with guns, or drunken soldiers, or howling prisoners, but still I can't get used to it. But the Nazi salute to the altar, to the chipped, scarred figure of Christ hanging crooked on the wall – still, I don't know, appropriate in its way.

'The longer we remain here,' he continued, noticing how his words echoed in the smoky darkness of the little vaulted roof, 'the more are the chances of us being suddenly recalled to the line. And I don't imagine anyone is desperate for that.' He enjoyed their laughter.

'I think we can leave the war to get on without us for a few days. It's unlikely to pine away with grief.' More laughter, but not from Lieutenant Dobermann, who fixed his Commanding Officer with a severe look and asked with repressive politeness:

'May one ask how the Herr Oberst proposes to get along the road in the face of all the traffic and with snow falling?'

'On his two feet, Dobermann, with the battalion behind him, following closely and faithfully like sheep making for new grass.' Von List's smile was not unkind.

'The men are leaving the line,' he added, 'they won't mind how much they have to push and shove.'

'You don't know they aren't alive, Heinrich,' said Kalbach, as they waited with the rest of the battalion for the mules to go by. 'After all they were only reported missing.'

'We'll just have to see.' Kumitsch stood leaning on the Spandau. Snow fell gently on the long line of men, and on the plodding mules on their way to the grumbling sounds of the front.

'Right, get fell in, Number One Platoon,' barked Sergeant Telling. They were on their way again. There was less stuff on the road now and the battalion swung along in fine style. Ziegler's company sang his favourite songs or respectfully chaffed their popular leader as he went up and down the column.

'You won't march like this on the way back,' he called to them.

'Who's thinking of the way back, sir?' they roared in answer. Kalbach's mouth-organ squeaked out another marching song and they picked up the words as their boots crunched rhythmically on the packed snow. Trudi bobbed up and down in her master's pack, now and then yelping excitedly.

At the head of the column, Colonel von List marched proudly, determined to master his limping leg, thinking first of his wife and then of all the things that could happen within the next fourteen hours to prevent his departure for Germany, and then again of his wife.

On leave: January 1945

THE time was eight-thirty in the morning and snow was falling on the blackened girders of the main station at Innsbruck.

'But doesn't the train stop at Weilheim?' Colonel von List's query was sharp. He had been travelling since five the previous evening with nothing to eat but some salami sausage and a lump of rather musty bread. His side hurt him badly after the journey from Bressanone, crammed into a compartment with eight other officers and hardly able to shift in his seat.

'What d'you mean, all the way to Munich? And then all the way back to Roth? It's crazy.'

'It's not the only thing that's crazy,' retorted the harassed railway official. He was besieged by a pushing, shoving mob of officers and men all firing questions at him. And the days when such questions could be answered were long since past.

'What about Linz? I've got to reach Linz by this afternoon.'

'You'll be lucky if you get there by next week,' shouted the official, fighting his way towards what was left of his office.

'Isn't there anything to eat in this God-forsaken dump?'

'Where can I get a connection for Stuttgart?' . . . 'What time's the next train for Leipzig?' . . . 'Well, come on, man. This is your job, isn't it?' So they badgered the poor man.

At the entrance to his sagging office the railwayman turned at bay, staring wildly at his persecutors.

'How the hell d'you think I can answer all your half-witted questions when no one knows when trains arrive, or leave, or anything any more?' He finished in a shrill voice, gesturing frantically at the new damage. 'What d'you think happened last night? A ball? Look at it! Just look at it! You warriors should leave your dug-outs now and then and find out for yourselves what it's like in the real front line.'

'But what about Linz?' repeated the Staff Captain at the top of his voice.

'I know nothing about Linz,' bawled the official, almost hysterical, reaching for the handle of his ragged door. 'For all I know the whole place is wiped off the map. Yes, off the map! Practically everything else is. Thanks to all of you in your fancy uniforms.'

He flung up his hands and vanished into his dusty office,

slamming the door so hard that chunks of stone, loosened by the night's bombing, fell out of the cracked wall. Von List walked away from the crowd, still surging in an angry field-grey sea round the official's temporary bolt-hole.

'But this is awful,' groaned the Staff Captain desperately. 'I've simply got to be in Linz by six at the very latest.'

'Does your job depend on it? Or your life?' demanded von List caustically. Glowering, the officer strode away, picking his feet clear of the plaster rubble. A mad-looking woman pushed an empty trolley along, followed by a procession of private soldiers, hopeful she was leading them to food.

'Is there a telephone anywhere about?' he asked a pair of military policemen.

'Over there, Herr Oberst. But I doubt if it works. We got it pretty bad last night. The filthy swine,' he added, glaring into the leaden sky.

'So it seems. It must be very unpleasant to be stationed in such a death-trap.' They saluted smartly, uncertain of his remark.

'Snooty bastard,' said one, as they watched him walk slowly along the crowded platform.

'Just because we aren't pasteboard heroes,' growled the other bravely. 'I've a good mind to – ' But the memory of the Knight's Cross and the hard, contemptuous look in the eyes of the small Colonel silenced him. 'Heh, you over there! Papers!' They swaggered over to a grizzled Corporal. 'Hurry it up, Grandpa!' They felt much better.

Von List blew a thick coating of dust from the telephone. After a long wait a faint, crackling voice said, 'Is this a priority call?'

'Yes,' said von List promptly.

'Hold on, please.'

While he waited, five soldiers gathered, trying to pretend they were merely sheltering from the rising wind. Dirty snow mixed with plaster dust and scraps of refuse blew about their huddled figures. A party of Russians was clearing rubble in a dispirited way under the guard of two elderly private soldiers with their hands in their pockets. The whole scene could hardly have been more gloomy.

'Hello,' rasped a new voice. 'What is the purpose of your call?'

'I have to speak to my commanding general.'

'At Roth?'

'Of course at Roth. He is on leave. Hurry, please. This call is very urgent.'

'Who is speaking?'

'General Kalbach,' he said on the spur of the moment. 'And for God's sake hurry, it's life and death!'

A long train clanked slowly into the station and the engine halted exactly opposite the booth. Troops came pouring from the snow-caked carriages. And then suddenly, miraculously in his

ear the voice of his wife.

'Darling it's me – Karl.'

Though she herself was only about forty miles away she could have been speaking from Mars.

'I hope to be back by this evening. By – this – evening – ,' he repeated through the deafening roar of escaping steam.

' . . . will be at Roth . . . ' That's all he heard, for the rasping voice cut in. 'Since when did Generals call each other darling ?' it asked with dry humour. As von List left the booth the waiting men made a rush at the door, hardly noticing this colonel who walked away through the steam laughing openly to himself.

He sat in the Munich train, huddled deep in his coat with his eyes shut; the Linz captain sat opposite, sandwiched between two rough-looking artillery majors, complaining in a querulous voice about life in general. Doors were slammed; they waited. Doors were opened again. The engine went off on its own. They waited in the freezing train which shook to the stamping of hundreds of icy feet. Another engine banged itself on to the train; doors banged again. Snowflakes glanced off the steamy windows. They waited for another hour, during which even the captain from Linz fell silent, exhausted by his ceaseless barrage of complaints. A frightened little whistle blew, and with a series of shuddering jolts they were off.

'This damned engine-driver would be better employed heaving shells,' muttered one of the gunner officers.

'Don't know why the hell they can't use women,' grunted his friend.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they crawled into Munich. The chaos on the platform seemed unlimited; officials were very sensibly absent, seeing to pressing matters elsewhere, and no one seemed to know anything about anything. At last von List ran some kind of a railwayman to earth in a tiny cubbyhole built of broken sleepers and tarpaulins. The man peered out from the shadowy little place like a nervous rat sniffing from its burrow. He was pink-eyed and stubbled, but more helpful than his colleague at Innsbruck.

'Things are far from easy on the railways these days,' he said with the solemn deliberation of the rather drunk, 'but for our returning heroes no effort can be too great, that's what I keep telling – '

'I'm sure your efforts are greatly appreciated,' said von List patiently. 'But all this returning hero wishes to know is when and where he can find a train to Roth. That's all. Just to Roth.'

'Aha,' said the man, putting his finger to his nose and winking, 'you couldn't have chosen better. Roth. Aha. As it happens a train is scheduled to leave platform six some time within the next three hours which should bring the Herr General to Roth certainly before the end of next month.' He giggled. 'Don't mind

me. Just my little joke. Platform six. And now, if the Herr General will excuse me I must work out the new time-tables for non-existent trains.'

Von List found a cup of coffee and two boot-leather sandwiches; then he joined a queue for a black-rimmed washbasin where a tap produced a trickle of cold water. In front of him was the awful captain from Linz. In his braces he looked that much worse. Feeling slightly pulled together by scraping at his face, brushing his hair and cleaning the taste of an empty stomach from his mouth, von List went in search of platform six. As usual the train had no engine. Finding room on a bench beside four morose civilian travellers, he kept watch for the engine. The four good citizens of Germany made room for him with bad grace; gone were the days when an officer of the Wehrmacht was treated with the respectful humility due to a gallant – and commissioned – defender of the Fatherland. Even the sight of the gleaming *Ritterkreuz* left them visibly unmoved. No admiring little glances; no small nudges and nods; no getting into conversation with the hero; only a couple of sullen glances and a shrinking into shells. For by now people did little talking to strangers; they conserved their energy for the grim business of getting through yet another day of this war that had recoiled so hideously upon them.

A great number of military policemen were marching up and down the crowded platform clearing paths for themselves like small snow-ploughs, demanding papers at random. Gradually the sounds of an altercation infiltrated into his sleepy brain.

'Your pay-book, I said. Are you deaf, or what? I presume you know what a pay-book looks like? Some of the muck they're sending to the front these days. No wonder it's taking so bloody long to finish the war. So you haven't got it, eh?'

'I'm sorry, I must have forgotten it,' said the voice of Private Kumitsch, politely and apologetically.

'So the Field-Marshal here must have forgotten it! That's very nice, I must say. Then you'll have to come with us, lad, won't you?'

'But – you've seen my pass. I must get to Mannheim. You don't understand – my parents. They're missing. There was a raid and they're missing. Look, I've a letter to prove it. Please, I must get back. Ah, thank God, Herr Oberst, I was telling them –'

'What's the trouble here?' enquired von List. The two 'bloodhounds' sprang to attention, barking out the details in strong, well-fed voices.

'You've seen his leave pass,' said von List, eyeing the two large men very coldly. 'You've seen the signature on it. That's my name. You're surely not questioning the authenticity of my signature?'

'Of course not, Herr Oberst,' said the senior one with a touch

of truculence. They well knew the extent of their powers, these gendarmes. So did von List. He knew they would be within their rights to refuse Kumitsch permission to proceed.

'But the fact remains, sir,' said the other bloodhound, 'this man is travelling without the proper documents required by – ' Against his will the man's beady eyes kept straying back to the cross at the officer's throat – 'by regulations.'

'As a matter of fact,' said von List in a reasonable tone, 'the whole thing is my fault. I happened to have had Private Kumitsch's pay-book among a number of others which I was looking through just before he applied for compassionate leave. Very stupidly I mislaid three of them – '

'Including this man's, Herr Oberst?'

'Including this man's. As it was essential for him to leave for his home at once I told him he was to go without the pay-book. So, if anyone has to be arrested then it's me.' He smiled charmingly, but with hard eyes. 'To fulfil regulations, which naturally one should do at all times, I will of course make out a covering note for Private Kumitsch. Or perhaps you would care to do that, Corporal? To spare him further embarrassment on his journey.'

When the policemen had stamped off, after having made out a species of cover note for the Colonel's signature, von List turned on Private Kumitsch.

'That was a damned careless thing to do. Travelling's bad enough as it is without a lot of nonsense with the M.P.s.'

Private Kumitsch hung his head. Then he thanked his Commanding Officer most sincerely.

'We've all got to stick together against those sort,' said von List firmly.

They stood against the wall, out of the way of the crowd.

'How long have you been waiting here?'

'About two hours, sir. Did you know that before the war the German railway system was the best in Europe?'

'When are you getting a connection, then?'

'In half an hour, or that's what they told me. But the train isn't even in yet. God knows when I'll get home.' Kumitsch sounded tired and a little forlorn. But he was smart and shaved and not like so many of the frowsty-looking objects in crumpled uniforms and with a night's beard on their washed-out faces.

'I don't want to raise your hopes by saying you've got nothing to worry about, Kumitsch, and that your parents are very likely alive and well, but I think there may be a chance that you'll find them. Hundreds are reported missing after these big raids who turn up later, often somewhere in the country. Have they anywhere? Some relations perhaps, living outside the city?'

'There's my cousin Mathilde. She's the one who wrote me the letter. But my father and hers never got on very well.' He shook

his head miserably. 'No, I don't think so,' he said.

'I imagine your uncle wouldn't have refused them shelter in the circumstances. And don't forget, your cousin's letter was posted some time ago. They could easily have turned up at your uncle's by now.' Again Kumitsch shook his head without answering.

'Try the hospitals first,' advised von List. 'Then the missing persons bureau, and the notice boards – '

'Excuse me, Herr Oberst,' interrupted Kumitsch quietly. 'But I know about these places. My brother was missing like this in '42. They found him after a while – or what was left of him.'

'I'm very sorry,' said von List.

Kumitsch remembered those terrible notice-boards; the pathetic scraps of paper stuck up with pins, broken knitting needles, slivers of glass: the desperate little appeals for news: 'Elizabeth, where are you?' . . . 'If you're alive, Hans, for God's sake come to number eight . . . '

'I've poked through the rubble, Herr Oberst. I know what it's like.'

The heavy *thomp-thomp-thomp* of a military band made itself heard above the noise of the platform. A path was cleared by officious M.P.s and it came swinging into view leading a body of troops in full marching order. The band wheeled into position beside a waiting train and finished the stirring march as a fat general appeared trailing the usual tail of staff officers and suchlike. This colourful little party took stance opposite the troops, most of whom could not have been over seventeen. Many of the other soldiers on the station, having nothing better to do, wandered over to watch, being kept away from the parade itself by the solid backs of the policemen. The band crashed to a stop.

'Men,' shouted the fat general. 'Today you are leaving for the front – ' the engine driver chose this moment to let off an enormous blast of steam which rolled over the general and his aides, hiding them from view.

' . . . where the opportunity awaits you to add fresh glory to the Greater German Wehrmacht,' boomed the fruity voice from the fog. 'Always remember that you are soldiers of – ' The engine excelled itself, adding a long whistle for good measure. But the general was made of stern stuff. Undeterred he carried on.

'On every front,' he cried, 'the armies of the Führer are waiting like hounds on the leash – ' An extra carriage was added to the train with a tremendous amount of clanking – 'and you will have the honour to go forward in this great advance, carrying with you the banner of the Reich until Final Victory is ours,' he concluded with a triumphant bellow.

'It's incredible, sir. They look like schoolboys,' said Private Kumitsch who was eighteen on his last birthday. 'Just look at their faces, Herr Oberst. They really *want* to go.' He watched

wonderingly as the latest batch of targets sprang to attention, thrusting out their chests and glowing with youthful pride. Glancing at him, von List thought, one of the children at least has suddenly become a veteran.

They waved from the windows, cheering and grinning as the band broke into the rousing strains of '*Ich hatt' einen Kamaraden*', and the engine tooted patriotically. The general stood at attention, saluting and obviously much affected.

'I once saw some cattle being slaughtered,' said Kumitsch. 'But they tried to get away from the smell of blood.' A voice announced something over the loudspeaker, barely audible above the braying of the band.

'That's my train, Herr Oberst. If you'll excuse me – ' He gave the Nazi salute.

'Kumitsch.'

'Herr Oberst?'

'I expect you back.'

'I'll be back,' said Private Kumitsch, holding himself very erect. 'Even if I have to walk.' He turned and went off, pushing his way through the throng.

'Good luck,' called von List.

'And to you, sir.'

The smiling face vanished in the crowd.

Six hours later Karl von List jumped from the meandering train on to the little platform at Roth.

As the train puffed away into the darkness, he heard the sleigh bells, the pounding hooves of a trotting horse and the sharp hiss of the runners on the crusted snow.

Then all the fatigue and pain and discomfort were forgotten in the softness of her furs, the pressure of her parted lips, the warmth of her neck. Gently, tenderly he pushed her away.

'Let's go home,' he said. 'Let's just go home.'

And, as he sat close against his wife, the jingle of the little bells was the most wonderful sound he had ever heard.

* * *

The little brown mongrel with the patched eye and soft ears yelped sharply in her sleep from where she lay in the corner of the room.

'If it hadn't been for her we'd never have met,' said Ernst Kalbach, machine-gunner in the Greater German Wehrmacht, with tender feeling.

'No,' agreed his companion, Marielena Crespi, one-time inhabitant of Rocca San Michele and now, among her other activities, waitress in her uncle Beniamino's small but flourishing restaurant.

'We have a lot to thank that dog for,' she continued, stretching out her hand towards him across the candlelit table on which lay

the remnants of their intimate meal.

In September the First Battalion had escaped from the line for a few days in Bologna. While driving with Sergeant-Major Weber and her master on some errand to do with billets Trudi, spotting an impertinent civilian dog of obviously high breeding trotting along on a lead, had leapt from the truck and dashed at the haughty aristocrat. During the ensuing brawl she had vanished round a corner with Kalbach in hot pursuit. When he finally caught up she was panting in the round brown arms of a laughing girl with long, dark eyes and fiery chestnut hair. Like Lieutenant Huth, he had never seen anything to equal this girl.

She, for her part, being a girl of remarkably good memory, knew that she had seen this dog before, running wild about her home; she thought – though she was not quite certain, so many of these German boys had the same sort of frank, open, healthy face and dusty fair hair – that she had also seen this young soldier before.

As her other activities included the gathering of information about German military matters however trivial, and as she liked the look of Private Kalbach, Marielena saw to it at once that they got on to good terms. For a girl of her appearance and ripe charms the rest was child's play.

'I shall always love that dog,' he said.

'As much as you love me, Ernst darling?' Beyond the light of the candle stuck in the Chianti flask her eyes were so dark as to be almost black. She felt the grasp of his hand tighten.

'I'll never love anyone as I love you, Marielena. Never.' He pulled her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers with sudden rough passion. The girl leant towards him very slowly so that her superb bosom rested on the table and his eyes flashed hot at the sight of the satin valley of her breasts. Then she drew back with a little husky laugh.

'*Pazienza*,' she whispered. Then she teased him. 'How many girls are there back in Germany who go watery at the knees when you look at them like that? How many German maidens fling themselves on their backs when the hero Kalbach – '

'Stop it,' he cried, laughing against his will. 'Stop it, you devil!'

Marielena jumped to her feet and, with a flaring swirl of her red skirt, carried the plates to the sink in the corner opposite to the low, divan-type bed. It was a small room, borrowed for the occasion from her sister, Sophia, and very simply furnished. Kalbach tried to focus clearly on the Madonna hanging above the head of the bed, but his head was muzzy from the *grappa* and the Holy Face was slightly blurred. There was a picture of a Tuscan hill village, sun-kissed among its cypress trees, tall green fingers tipped with flame. The little flame of the table candle shivered to the draught of her skirt, then her finger-tips brushed the short hairs at the back of his neck.

'What do you see in the candle-smoke, little German?'

'With you so close, what else can I see?' He grabbed for her hand, but she was gone, laughing gaily at the compliment.

'Can the hero help with the washing up?'

Suddenly Ernst Kalbach dropped the dishcloth and put his strong young arms round her, pressing his lips into her neck.

'My darling. My sweet.' She felt the savage little pain of his teeth. Gasping breathlessly, she twisted her body in his grasp, and his hands found her breasts.

'Please,' he panted. 'Now!'

'*Pazienza, cara* – ' she began, but cried out as his teeth closed on the lobe of her ear.

'We must – now. I want you, Marielena.' The convulsive pressure of his hands increased until it bruised her flesh.

'Ernst! You're hurting me!' His grip slackened.

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.' He stood back deeply distressed, while she rearranged her crumpled shirt.

'It's only – '

'I know, *cara*. I understand.'

'Don't you like me?' he asked, looking like a small boy wanting confirmation that his mother loved him.

'Perhaps it's because I do like you so much,' she said, fingering the tiny bleeding marks on her ear. And this was true. She had come, during their three meetings, to feel very tenderly for this shy boy with the strength of a man in his arms, and the passions of a man in his heart. She looked at the blood on her finger and thumb.

'We may never have another chance,' he said, with the same hot glow rekindled in his eyes. 'I've only got until Thursday. We have to go back.' He played his highest trump, though possibly unconsciously. 'I may be wounded or killed. Oh, Marielena, why d'you say no?'

'Have I said no?' Her voice trembled like the minute ripples of warm and shining water touched by a soft breeze. Very slowly one hand went out to extinguish the candle as the other crept to the fastenings of her skirt. The glow of the little stove was like a watchful red eye.

For what he lacked in finesse Ernst Kalbach made up with the ardour of his lovemaking. But the little cries and moans wrung from her by his searching hands were swallowed up by the noise of the aircraft engines and the whistling screech of the bombs falling through the moonlit sky. The shaking of the divan bed merged with the sudden fierce shudders of the house and the room was lurid with the red flame of the explosions which forced her wet and writhing body ever closer so that the man and the girl seemed fused into one mass of straining flesh. In an ecstasy of lust and fear she gave herself completely into his hands. And, for both of them, it did not matter if, during those last frantic

moments, the whole roof was to come crashing on to them.

'*Si, si*,' she cried. 'Yes. Don't stop!' A heavy truck rumbled by over the cobbles, increasing speed as it went. Sirens wailed, rising and falling, rising and falling. Then they stopped and Ernst lay inert on her quivering body; it was a long moment before her hooked fingers relaxed from the slow heave of his shoulders.

'God, you're lovely,' he said, rising on his arms. 'You're wet and shining and lovely.' Her hand came up and stroked his short, damp hair. 'You're so lovely,' he kept repeating in wonder.

'My little German,' she said fondly. 'Who is such a man.'

They stood by the window watching the air-raid, now concentrated on the northern part of the city. Smoke drifted across the full face of the moon so that little shadows played on her body, rosy from the flames of a tall burning building. The barking of the German anti-aircraft batteries never ceased, and the shells twinkled in wicked little clusters. As they watched, holding each other close, fitting snugly into each other's bodies, an aeroplane plunged like a slow red comet sending up a quick blast of fire as it struck the earth. He felt her shudder slightly and, in answer, his encircling fingers caressed her breast.

'What we've just done,' she said. 'All that heaven, is it merely so that one day someone can finish like that?' She nodded at the dying pyre beyond the city. In answer Ernst Kalbach lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

They lay drinking wine and teasing each other with eyes and fingers.

'How is my home?' she asked, running her hand along the great muscle of his thigh.

'I'm afraid you'd hardly recognise it,' he answered, tracing a butterfly path from a polished shoulder to a polished knee. 'The place is buried under war-paint. We have a new C.O.' He talked admiringly of Colonel von List. 'Most of the boys would do anything for him. I don't quite know why. I suppose he's just got the knack. One thing, he treats us as if he was really interested, not like some of them who make one feel like a block of wood.'

'And that creature who calls himself your adjutant, is he still there?'

'Captain Stempfe? Yes, we still have him.' The sirens proclaimed the skies to be safe. 'You sound as if you know him,' said Kalbach suspiciously, breaking off a very intimate caress.

'He was there with the other officer, the one who is an artist. I met them when your battalion first came to Rocca San Michele.' With a little trickle of wine at the corner of her mouth she leant and kissed him on the lips so that he tasted the wine.

'But this new commander you have,' she said after an active pause. 'He sounds a real fire-eater.'

'No. He's not at all like that. No shouting or stamping. But

when he tells you something you listen.'

'Is he here in Bologna?'

Kalbach shook his head, his eyes never leaving her body.

'In Germany, I think.'

'He'll come back, I suppose?'

'Of course he'll come back. What d'you think? He's going to run away or something?' He laughed. 'Under a man like him one feels one could go on fighting forever.'

She gazed at him very seriously.

'Do you want to?'

Equally seriously and taking her hand in his, Ernst Kalbach said:

'No, my love, I don't. I want this war to end tomorrow so that I can take you home to Germany as my wife.'

They discussed this latest development with increasing ardour until their sensible phrases became lost in the overflowing words of mounting passion.

Just before daylight, with the golden dawn tainted by the smell of charred timber, and as he buckled himself unwillingly into his uniform, she asked sleepily from the bed: 'Shall I see you again before you go back, Ernst?'

'No,' he said gloomily. 'We go this evening.'

'I expect you drive in great style?'

'Since when does the foot-slogger ride in trucks? No, *Liebchen*, your Ernst walks on his own two flat feet.'

'Kiss me,' she demanded with sudden desperate urgency. 'Kiss me, darling.' She clung to him so tightly he could hardly free himself from the soft strength of her arms.

* * *

The American bombers filled the upper skies with a dull, droning roar as they flew south from another massive raid.

'They're like horrible little insects.' Karl felt his wife's hand tighten on his arm. 'Why do they have to come and spoil everything? Can't we have just today in peace?'

'Nothing could spoil today,' he said. 'Nothing. I've got you.' He leant close and kissed the corner of her mouth. But Ledi sat watching the tiny silver planes until they had disappeared beyond the white peak of the Zugspitze.

'Look at it,' he said. 'This place could never change.' Below, in the valley among pine trees heavy with snow, the little frozen lake was covered with the darting figures of children skating. Their joyful cries rose through the sharp, bright air.

Sitting on the bench outside the hut Karl and his wife looked down on a world of glittering, breath-taking beauty; these mountains echoed, not to the ugly sounds of war, but to the laughter of happy children and the distant jingle of sleigh-bells. He felt her shiver beside him, as if still gripped by the unseen

shadow of those little silver insects.

'Come on, Mummy! Aren't you coming? Please hurry.' Their daughter climbed towards them dragging her sledge. Margarethe was five and already very like her mother: fair, with the same lively blue eyes.

'Leave her a bit longer,' called Karl. 'She's old, she needs a rest. In a minute. Remember, she's a poor old thing.'

His daughter regarded him solemnly without speaking for she was very shy of him. After all, why not? In the last five years she had only seen him on four occasions, and then only for a few days. To her he was the stranger with whom her mother was always so gay and smiling. She stood in the snow some way off, gazing at him uncertainly.

'Please, Mummy.'

'Just one more time, darling, then we must go.' The warmth was fading from the afternoon sun; already half the lake was in the shadow of the tall trees.

'See if you can get to the bottom without falling off.' Ledi knelt to put on her skis. 'By the time you get back again I'll be ready.'

'All right then.'

Shrieking with exaggerated delight Margarethe rushed down the long white slope on her toboggan, falling off in a flurry of snow and shrill, excited cries.

'Will she ever get used to me, d'you think?' His voice was wistful.

'Of course, silly.' He watched her slim brown hands fastening the bindings of the skis.

'To her you're still the mysterious figure who suddenly appears –' Ledi glanced at him over her shoulder from the corner of her eyes. 'And who makes her mother so utterly and wonderfully happy.' She straightened up, slapping her skis hard on the snow, up and down with quick little movements of her long, slender legs.

'I love you, Karl,' she said. 'You suit me.'

'It's been a wonderful day and there's no one in this world I'd rather have spent it with.'

'There'll be lots more,' she said.

'You've got a most attractive smile,' he said softly.

That's how it had been all day. Teasing, loving laughter; the touch of hands, the kisses stolen when Margarethe lay face down in the snow or was busy with her own little games.

'It's like it always is,' he said. 'I've fallen in love with my wife yet again.'

Her eyes were very tender as she looked at him. She shook back her fair, silken hair – for she skied bareheaded – and put on her red leather gloves.

'Ledi?'

'What is it, sweetheart?'

'I'm sorry about last night.'

'Why be sorry?' She leant forward between her sticks and kissed him lightly on the nose.

'Tonight it'll be like it used to be,' she whispered. 'Like it should be with us.' Her lips were slightly parted. 'You were too exhausted, darling. That's all. And too tensed up still.'

'Mummy! Mummy! I only fell off once that time!' They waved to their daughter who sat in a heap of snow hugging her toboggan.

'If it hadn't been for this hut she wouldn't be sitting there now, making a tactless nuisance of herself,' he said fondly. August, 1939. The trees a deep and murmuring green; the slopes blazing with mountain flowers and the sweet-smelling bed of grass in the shade of this same little hut where Margarethe had been conceived in a glorious climax of love.

'D'you remember the smell of the grass?' He held out his hand to her. Then he laughed.

'I believe you're blushing.'

Her eyes shone as she shook her head.

'There was an eagle,' she said. 'But – '

'At that particular moment I would hardly have seen a whole squadron of eagles.'

'Are you coming? Why aren't you coming?' The child's voice broke across their intimacy and somehow made it complete.

'I'll go down, darling. You follow and join us by the lake.' With a jump and a hard stab with the sticks she was away, twisting and turning with a harsh hiss of skis. He watched her proudly. She was a magnificent skier. Before the war he had barely held his own with her; now, with the wounds in his legs and side he could not manage. Perhaps one day again. He heard her laughing with their daughter, dodging the badly aimed snowballs. Karl picked up the rucksacks and started slowly down.

'Again, Mummy, again!'

Margarethe skipped about, flinging snow in wild handfuls.

Throughout the hours of that day both he and Ledi had managed to pretend that this life would continue for ever and that the sun would remain shining on them from the pale blue winter sky. But it was dropping towards trees that stood blacker every moment against the western sky.

'Karl!' She waved one of her sticks. 'Hello, Karl!'

'Hello, Ledi!' He too waved.

The echoes of their voices died among the forests. No mention of the war; no mention of Italy. No hint on her smiling face of what lay ahead, two short days away. It was amazing, miraculous, how a woman who loves can build the fleeting hours into this marvellous feeling of permanence, he thought wonderingly. Even though she knows it will have vanished in a flash.

They were off again. Ledi plunging towards the trees like a curving red arrow, the child bustling behind on her swaying sledge, shouting, 'Wait for me! Wait for me!'

As the distant trees turned to a hedge of dark spears against the dying sun he felt the first frozen breath of the mountain night.

Frau Rottendorp left the room on Ledi's arm, moving with the gait of an old woman, though she was in fact only fifty-six. The three men resumed their seats and sat smoking their cigars in tactful silence. It was a small, luxurious room of dark wood and sporting prints: men in green Jäger dress with rifles on their shoulders; a dead stag bleeding into a frozen mountain stream. Chamois heads stared down with glassy eyes glinting in the light of the six tall candles. A large, blue-tiled stove gave off a pleasant warmth from one corner. How civilised, thought Karl, how comfortable, how completely impervious to any inconvenient pressures such as war or defeat. The expensive blue smoke of the fat cigars floated in a rich haze above their heads.

'She still feels it terribly,' said Herr Rottendorp. 'Poor Ilse, she was quite prostrated by the news.' He sighed deeply, gazing into his big-bellied glass of brandy with glistening eyes.

'The last of the Hine,' he remarked. Suddenly pulling himself together and firming his sagging red face, he said loudly and firmly, 'Whichever way you look at it, there's no doubt this war has gone on long enough.' He challenged the others to contradict with his bulging, blue eyes.

'Siggy died a hero's death,' said his son, blowing a heavy cloud of smoke. 'If only Mother would realise that.'

'Would she find it any consolation?' Karl regarded his young brother-in-law without much warmth. Siegfried Rottendorp was almost too Aryan to be true; another Dobermann, only more so, with his curly blond hair and eyes the colour of glacier ice. At first he had sat slim and proud in the uniform of the Waffen S.S. but now, having put away more drink than was good for him, he sagged low in his chair with the uniform bulging in unmilitary creases. His well-proportioned features shone with a dull sheen of sweat. At first he had been quiet, slightly overawed by Karl's presence and the sight of the Knight's Cross, but now he was becoming not only talkative but truculent.

'He's brought great honour to our family,' he insisted. 'You must see that, Father.' Sigismund had been the eldest, the favourite, the blue-eyed boy, adored by his mother, much more companion to Ledi than he had ever been.

'She'll get over it,' he said with a nasty little twist to his full mouth. Karl could almost see the chip shining on the boy's shoulder.

'That will do, Siegfried,' said his father sharply. 'We have all

been through a very great strain during these last weeks.'

'To give one's life for Germany is the greatest – '

'I said, that will do.' There was steel in the voice.

'How are you getting on at the training school?' asked Karl in an effort to change the subject.

'Very well,' said Siegfried sullenly. He was keen and quite fearless over the obstacle courses, dynamic in charge of battle-drill.

'Does the wound still cause you any trouble?'

Siegfried shook his head, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. During his first day in action on the Normandy front a badly aimed German mortar bomb had put a small splinter into his behind. He preferred not to discuss his wound. To restore his confidence he fingered his gold badge of the Hitler youth.

'Some more brandy, Karl?' Herr Rottendorp pushed the decanter across the gleaming table. 'We may as well kill the bottle. There's precious little gracious living to be had these days.' For the next five minutes he held forth on the subject of the sufferings and shortages endured by the civilian population. Karl listened in silence, having little to contribute to that particular subject. His father-in-law appeared to have weathered the shortages remarkably well. Large and red and well-fleshed, his bald head shining like polished leather in the candlelight, this was one of the great industrialists of Germany, one of the men who had backed Hitler from the very start. Kirdorf. Thyssen. Krupp. And Franz Rottendorp, who sat waffling on about the difficulty of finding a decent chef. National Socialism a bulwark against revolution; Hitler to guarantee fat contracts; the future of the armament kings rosy once more. That had been the general idea. But perhaps Herr Rottendorp would rather have kept his eldest son.

'We had a most excellent dinner,' said Karl. 'Your cook seems to be able to work miracles with nothing in his store cupboard,' he added somewhat dryly.

'Here things are not so difficult, but at home – ' He spread out his hands. 'At home, my dear Karl, the situation is far from happy.'

'The Führer has things well in control,' promised Siegfried, emerging from his black mood.

'The situation had to get worse before it could improve, eh?' Karl smiled amicably.

'When the right moment comes then we shall hit back with a fury that will astound the world.' Karl had a sudden sharp wish for Ziegler to be there, or Buchner.

'With our fists?' He was very restrained. For the sake of Ledi he refrained from speaking his mind to this brash young fool.

'Can you deny that Germany is setting an example of fighting spirit and patriotism – '

'Patriotism?'

'Why, is it a dirty word then? Have you any objection to the word? What about you, Father?'

'Sensible men – ' began Herr Rottendorp, then decided not to continue. Many fathers had been sent to the gallows by their sons.

'I'm not talking about sensible men,' cried his son passionately, 'I'm talking about men who are still prepared to fight and die for our great country. The S.S. – '

'Is it only the S.S. who are fighting?' There was a lurking hint of anger in Karl's eyes. He was becoming just a little bored.

'In the battle of Normandy I served with the 12th S.S. Panzer Division, the "Hitler Jugend", under Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer. My God, there was a man! Always in the thick of it. We'd have done anything for him, anything at all.' A sort of glazed look had come over Siegfried's face, as if the sweat had frozen.

'He wasn't the sort of traitor who plots against our Führer,' he burst out furiously. 'My God, those swine deserved to die as they did.' He glared like a maddened young beast. Herr Rottendorp studied the long, drooping nose of ash on his cigar.

'Colonel von Stauffenberg was my friend,' said Karl. There had been times when he had spoken in that tone to the men under his command. Lieutenant Siegfried Rottendorp reacted as they had done: he sat up, startled and confused.

'I think you should go to bed, Siegfried,' said his father.

'But – I – '

'You couldn't have known.' Karl was surprisingly gentle, again for his wife's sake.

'You are tired,' pointed out Herr Rottendorp very firmly. 'If you're thinking of skiing tomorrow – '

With more muttered apologies and a noisy clicking of heels the fuddled boy marched unsteadily from the room.

When the ash dropped Herr Rottendorp broke the silence.

'I am sorry, Karl. I'm sure he didn't mean it. But he's still very young.'

'Please forget it. They fill them up with a great deal of nonsense in the S.S.' He relit the dead cigar, wanting Ledi to come back. He'd always enjoyed seeing her by candlelight.

'I'm afraid it's too late for that kind of wild talk,' observed Herr Rottendorp. His eyes popped like those of a nervous Pekinese.

'The wind's getting up,' Karl said. They listened to the mournful sound prowling round the little hunting lodge.

'Sensible men must look to the future,' mused his father-in-law. As a building contractor on a vast scale his future anyway seemed secure enough; there would be no shortage of work in Germany once the bombers had completed their task.

'Yes,' Karl agreed.

'No one can know how much longer the war will last.'

'No,' Karl agreed. They were like two men investigating an uncharted minefield.

Would the day ever come again when men would speak what was in their minds?

'I've been thinking,' went on Herr Rottendorp, sheering off dangerous ground. Karl waited. What on earth was Ledi doing?

'May I speak frankly, Karl?'

'Of course.'

'I think – well, dammit, it's time you thought of Ledi and the children.' Herr Rottendorp fortified himself with another long sip.

'I very often do,' said Karl mildly.

'You know what I mean. Look here, you've done more than your share, Karl. One's only got to look at those –' he waved his cigar at Karl's tunic.

'I've a certain – hm – influence in high places,' he said modestly. 'If anyone's earned a safe billet for the last few months of the war, it's you.' His eyes were glistening again. How he could have produced a daughter like Ledi, thought Karl, not for the first time. And yet there's something likeable about the man.

'Well, what d'you say?' Herr Rottendorp leaned forward expectantly.

'And what happens to the men I am supposed to be leading to final victory?'

'Oh, good God, not another idealist!' Herr Rottendorp, the leader of an empire, the man obeyed without argument by thousands, exploded loudly.

'Thank you,' said Karl. 'Please don't think I'm ungrateful –'

'Ungrateful! I think you're a bloody fool. Finish this brandy, perhaps that'll pour some sense into you'

'You're Ledi's father. Do you really think –' At this moment she came in. Karl's face lit up as he smiled at his wife.

'I passed Siegfried on the stairs,' she said. 'He seemed rather upset about something.' Karl could not take his eyes off her. Dressed very simply in a short black dress she looked like a girl of eighteen. Her arms shone golden in the soft light and the pupils of her large eyes were little velvet moons as she looked at him.

'He'd had too much to drink,' said her father bluntly.

'How is your mother?' asked Karl. She must have taken endless trouble to find the lipstick he liked; the scent on her body was his favourite.

'She's asleep.' Her eyes never left his.

'I was just telling this stubborn husband of yours it was time he got himself a Staff job. What d'you think, my dear? Don't you want him safe?'

And his daughter, smiling softly at her husband, answered, 'You know as well as I do, Father, I married a soldier.'

She had drawn back the curtains and stood looking at the moonlight on the slope rising beyond the dark valley and the shadows of the silent trees lying like short black darts across the snow. The wind had dropped, leaving a night of clear, crackling cold, bitter enough to freeze the very stars to twinkling blue ice behind the bright wash of the snow-moon. She did not turn round when he came in, but continued to gaze through the misted glass as though fascinated by the bitter white beauty of the night. But as she heard the door closing softly and his steps across the room the woman's breathing quickened and her body began to quiver like a taut wire under sudden enormous strain.

'I love to see you by candlelight,' he said from just behind her. 'But the moon is even better.' His arms went round her breasts and his lips parted against the warm nape of her neck. Ledi strained back against him, twisting her head, searching for his mouth.

'You're trembling,' he whispered. 'You're trembling like you used to.'

'Are you surprised, my darling? Is it wrong for a wife to tremble when she wants her husband so much?' Her body moved more quickly within the strong circle of his arms; already the lips which found his own were wet.

'I thought the evening would never end.' The point of her tongue was a little searching animal. 'We're alone, Karl. I love you. I want you.' She twisted right round to face him with the moon behind her head. Everything was black: her open mouth, her eyes, the rounded little shadows of her breasts rising for him from the deep curve of her dress – everything was soft and black, except her arms; they were bathed in shining milk as her fingers came up to take the Knight's Cross from his throat.

'I married a soldier,' she said. 'And I married a man, a husband.' Slowly she began to unbutton his tunic. 'And a lover.' Their eyes never strayed from each other. It was very quiet in the room save for the excited little sound of their breathing. From the next room, through the half open door, came the sudden small cry of a child in its sleep. She saw the quick frown on his face.

'It's all right, sweetheart, they won't wake – not tonight.' His teeth gleamed in a smile and, at the sight, she gave a sort of little groan and flung herself against him.

'Undress me, Karl. Like you used to do. Quickly. Now. I want you to see me.'

As he unrolled the silken sheaths from her legs he knelt and kissed the long white smoothness of her thighs . . . he kissed her feet . . . She stepped from the crumpled heap of garments, hold-

ing out her arms to him.

'Turn round,' he commanded gently. 'With your arms above your head. Slowly. Yes, that's it!' Her body shone alternately white and softly shadowed as she turned, showing herself to her lover, smiling without shyness in the brilliant light of the moon.

'You're an abandoned woman,' he said with a tiny gasp, smiling in answer.

'That's what I want to be tonight.'

His uniform, his decorations, all his soldier's impedimenta lay scattered at his feet and he faced her as she was. With a sudden sharp cry she came to him. She was kissing the scars on his face, on his body, and he felt the urgency in her stroking, questing hands.

'God,' she cried, her mouth buried in his body. 'Oh, God, it's been a long time. Sometimes I thought I'd die, it was so awful.'

'I'm here, my dearest, I'm here.'

Consumed by a sudden fierce impatience they embraced with all their limbs and then, breaking apart for an instant, dragged each other, kissing and biting in a frenzy of love, to the moonlit bed.

And the same moon that looked down upon the simple mating of Marielena Crespi and Ernst Kalbach, now regarded with the same cold and careless eye passion of a very different quality. For here was all the tenderness, all the sudden sharp brutality, all the desperate desire to give pleasure of a man and a woman who try with all the skill and ingenuity of their minds and bodies to show their love for each other . . .

He lay with his face pillowed on her breast, the little sleeping nipple firm against his ear.

'Thank you, Karl,' said his wife, wonderfully satisfied, her whole body and mind enveloped in a warm sea of relaxed contentment. For the first time since he had last lain beside her, Ledi felt utterly and gloriously at peace.

'You're a wonderful woman,' he said sleepily. 'You're a very wonderful and co-operative woman.'

'I didn't know one could love a man like this.' Her arm drew him closer.

But he was asleep.

When they went to bed on the last night the wind was blowing hard from the East, the first bitter outrider of the Russian armies sweeping across the romantic and beautiful German mountains.

'If this goes on, Karl, you won't get away in the morning,' Herr Rottendorp had said with a tactless attempt at jocular encouragement.

But now Ledi lay awake with a sinking heart, for the wind had dropped away to a deep sighing in the trees and the snow-clouds had vanished from the face of the moon. Beside her she heard

Karl's steady breathing; his arm lay across her hips; now and then he stirred slightly in his sleep. This night would last till they died. She had a sudden violent wish to die, now, as they were – it could be no worse than what lay a few short hours away. The tick of the alarm clock pierced her like the stab of a blade. Oh, God, surely it couldn't be morning showing between the curtains, surely tonight the dawn would stay hidden, never come to disfigure the friendly darkness that kept him beside her.

She turned her head on the pillow and saw that his eyes were open.

'What's the time?' he asked at once, beginning to sit up.

'It's all right, my darling. It's only the moon. Go back to sleep.' She did not want him to sleep. He lay listening.

'The wind's gone,' he murmured.

'I know.'

'You were wonderful, Ledi. You've never made it so marvellous as that.' Sleepily his hand stole across to lie holding her breast.

'You were pretty good yourself,' she said light-heartedly. They lay quietly. A bright shaft of moonlight lay along the centre of the bed like a cold spear between them. Ledi clenched her fists and bit her lip so that a tiny droplet of blood formed and burst into a trickle. Her whole body tensed in a supreme effort to fight back the grief and despair welling in a dark flood from her stricken heart.

'What is it? My dearest one, what is it?' He took her in his arms.

'That damned clock,' she said into the hollow of his shoulder. 'That damned awful clock!'

He stroked her hair and felt the warm tears on his skin.

'Don't,' he implored, 'Ledi, please don't.' She shook her head and clung to him with a wild desperation.

'I can't bear it,' she sobbed, her whole body racked and shuddering in his arms. 'I can't let you go, Karl. I can't.' She flung her head back so that he saw the gleaming wetness of her cheeks; she pulled her arms free and, like a child, pressed her small, bunched fists into her eyes as if trying to force the brimming tears.

'But I must, sweetheart. Don't you see that I must.' His voice was choked. His wife lay beside him with her face twisted by a terrible, silent paroxysm of grief.

'My darling heart.' He was crying. 'It's been so wonderful, these days together. At least we've had that.' He buried his face in the pillow. Her arms fell to her sides. She stared blindly at the ceiling above her while the shaking of his body slowly quietened.

'I'm sorry,' she said more calmly. 'It only makes things harder for you.' Stay with me; stay with your family; don't go away. Stay and look after us. Stay and love us. More than anything she

longed to plead these words, but instead she whispered, 'Forgive me, Karl. I was weak and silly.'

'Forgive? My sweet wife, I think you're one of the bravest women I've ever met and I love you, my God, how I do love you.'

'Say that again, Karl. Just say it again.'

They turned to each other, embracing with a strength that not even death would have slackened. Her tears came again so that their kisses tasted warm of salt and the blood from her torn lip, and the moonlight was no longer a spear to separate them but a brilliant pall joining their bodies as one.

They no longer heard the remorseless reminder of the clock and the future was a hundred hours away.

But the morning came in a blaze of snow-fire that turned the mountains to sparkling crystal and the trees to shrouded white candles. It came with the cruel clamour of the clock and the merciless sound of the sleigh-bells.

Smiling for the benefit of her daughter and the man who was leaving, Ledi von List tucked the rug round his legs.

'We haven't much time,' said the driver. 'The road's bad after that wind.'

'Take care of yourself, Karl.'

'And you.'

Her eyes were bright. She smiled again, holding Margarethe by the hand. Her other hand lay in Karl's; his grip was hurting her.

'You'll write, won't you?'

'Of course.'

'If you want to catch the train,' said the driver from his little seat.

'You will look after yourself and – ' began Karl. But he was weaker than she. He swallowed hard, then suddenly shouted angrily at the man: 'All right then, get on with it!'

Ledi stood by the door, the smile still on her lips, until the hiss of the runners had faded and there was only the little tinkle of the bells. Just before the sleigh vanished round the side of the hill he turned once more and waved. Then there was nothing. Only the white beauty of the snow and the tracks on the road leading round the little hill. But still she heard the bells.

'Mummy.' The child looked up at her with eyes so like his.

'Mummy, can we go sledging now? Like we did before?'

'Yes, dear. Get your things.'

With the dragging steps of someone drugged or utterly drained of strength and will, Ledi von List turned back into the house.

PART TWO

Italy: January-April 1945

I

'WILL the Herr Oberst be going to bed?' Private Schulz had got everything ready in the most inviting way.

'No, Schulz. Just bring me some shaving water, that's all.' Schulz hovered, clearly bursting to say something.

'Begging the Herr Oberst's pardon, but has – '

'Yes, I've heard about it. A bad business, Schulz. Now, hurry up with the hot water, there's a good fellow – oh, and Schulz, I'll be needing this uniform by ten o'clock. Can you manage to improve it in any way?'

'I'll have a good try, sir.'

The Colonel looked like his uniform: crumpled and stained and grey. Dreadful, thought Schulz very worried, for he had grown fond of his officer; haggard, drawn, with dark stains under his eyes and hours of dark stubble on his exhausted face.

When Schulz returned with the hot water von List was lying on the bed with his eyes open. He knew that once closed they would never open again. God, what a journey.

'Never travel by train, Schulz.'

'No, Herr Oberst.'

'Or at least wait till the war's over and they don't take thirty hours to cover two hundred miles, bombs included.'

'Everything's ready,' said Schulz. Von List shaved in his greatcoat, revelling in the feel of the thin soap and the hot water on his prickling skin.

'Did you have a good time in Bologna?' he asked, trying to put off the moment when he'd have to start facing the tragic events of the night.

'It was a change, sir.'

'But you'd rather have been at Oberammergau.' He rinsed his face and rubbed the softened skin with the rough towel till his cheeks lost their drained appearance.

'The crowd of Ities that shot up the battalion last night,' exclaimed Schulz, his frank young Saxon face burning with indignation, 'They won't get away with it, will they, sir?'

'What d'you want me to do? Go tearing into the blue covered in shaving soap?'

Schulz grinned; he liked that sort of remark.

'But what made them do it?' He sounded genuinely puzzled.

'If a foreign army ever came to occupy your home, what would you do, Schulz?'

'I'd fight them,' answered Schulz simply.

'Exactly.'

The orderly stood with von List's uniform over his arm, frowning slightly.

'Will they ever do that, Herr Oberst? They won't get to Germany. We'll stop them before that.' Von List did not answer.

'Won't we, sir? We'll never have the Tommies and the Americans telling us what to do in our own country. We are going to stop them, surely, sir?'

'I'm afraid I'm not God, Schulz. All I do know is that I want that uniform back in half an hour.'

'Yessir. I'm sorry, sir. At once.' Private Schulz shot from the room. Von List lay back on the bed, longing for oblivion; longing to creep away and let someone else take up the burden of the next few hours. Thirty-six hours ago he had lain in the arms of his wife, safe, secure, no longer to do with the world's ceaseless torment, and now? Now four hundred men looked to him to work more miracles. What the gods give with one hand they certainly snatch swiftly away with the other. He drew a blanket over him, for the room was very cold. Then he held Ledi's picture close to his face, willing the shiny flat print to turn to rounded, laughing flesh and blood. Her words came to him, clear as the sound of the morning guns: 'I married a soldier.'

With the physical effort of drawing a deep breath he put away his moment of self-pity and began to untangle his thoughts. The battalion ambushed on the road back from Bologna; fifteen casualties including the worst blow of all, Ziegler dead. Ziegler, one of the indestructibles, who had known he was going to die.

At least the bullet can have come as no surprise to him. Now Dobermann would have the Company and God only knows what trouble he'll cause with his clumsy, unsympathetic ways. And this unpleasant business of Kalbach's arrest. Holmers hadn't known the details . . . Picked up early this morning not far from Regimental Headquarters . . . Some cock and bull story of Dobermann's about the man trying to desert to the partisans. That damned Iron Cross must have addled his brain. He'd see him first, then Clausitz, then Kalbach. Presumably the day would end sometime. Von List tried vainly to relax until Schulz returned with his uniform and glossy, officer's boots.

For the first ten minutes Colonel Clausitz insisted on talking social pleasantries, to show what a highly civilised and sophisti-

cated gentleman he was. He wanted to know all about von List's attractive and altogether charming wife. 'And Herr Rottendorp?' 'Full of plans for the future,' said von List. 'As always,' he added. 'Ah, yes, if we could but see into the crystal ball,' murmured Clausitz.

'Excuse me, Colonel, but I have come to see you about what has already happened,' interrupted von List bluntly. 'To be precise, about the matter of Private Kalbach.'

'Ah, yes, a most unfortunate affair. But no doubt you already know most of the details.' Colonel Clausitz studied his well-kept nails.

'Only that my battalion has lost its best company commander, plus another fourteen men it cannot spare, and that one of my men is in close arrest on a charge of desertion in face of the enemy. Quite a little surprise after my leave,' he finished sardonically.

'We will have some coffee, my dear fellow,' said Clausitz blandly, 'and then see what can be done to sort out this mess.'

The coffee was excellent. Such men as Clausitz would manage to eat well in the middle of the Sahara. When others were feeding on rotting scraps he and his kind would be gorging themselves on rats, superbly cooked. In the matter of looking after their creature comforts there was a certain class of men who were supreme.

'I don't want to criticise anyone,' remarked Clausitz. 'But it would appear from the reports I've received that there was a certain degree of – shall we say confusion – during the attack by those Italian bandits last night. I must say I find it hard to understand why Major Holmers was not in command.'

'Major Holmers was at Rocca San Michele preparing for the arrival of the battalion.' Von List felt his temper rising. 'I take full responsibility for the arrangements,' he said. 'And anyway, it's not exactly easy to avoid confusion – as you call it, Colonel – during the first stages of a surprise attack in the dark. I gather that Lieutenant Roske took control of the situation with remarkable speed and decision – '

'Surprise,' said Clausitz. 'Surprise. That's exactly it. Doesn't it surprise you that the bandits were waiting at that particular spot, ideal for ambush I understand, just at that particular moment?' He showed his polished teeth in a triumphant smile. 'They were not there by mistake. They were there – ' He picked up a small notebook and waved it under von List's nose. 'They were there because they had information.' He slapped the book on the table. 'And the proof's in here.' His face shone like a smooth red stone.

'This is a diary,' he said. 'It belongs to Private Kalbach, and it contains enough to hang him ten times over.' The china eyes gleamed for an instant.

'Allow me to read you a few short extracts.' Beyond his silver

hair the wall of his office was covered in glossy photographs: of Clausitz with other gentlemen of the Staff; Clausitz with various generals; in the place of honour a blown-up picture of Clausitz saluting his smiling Führer with upflung arm. No front-line pictures. Colonel Clausitz was reading, in the honeyed tones he would surely use with a woman. 'September 21st: I cannot believe it! God, what heaven. She's so utterly lovely. Her body! And she let me do it. She's so sweet. I love her. I love her . . .' The point of Clausitz's red tongue ran swiftly round his lips. Von List felt himself flushing. This was like spying through a keyhole; eavesdropping on precious intimacy. 'I don't quite see,' he began, but Clausitz waved him silent.

'September 23rd: – We are now back in the line – how I miss her. I pray she is safe. I could never love anyone else, never . . .' The stilted protestations of a boy in love.

'What's this got to do with his arrest?' A little pulse trembled in von List's neck. The scars stood out very white against the rising flush of his face. Without answering, Colonel Clausitz flicked over the pages.

'After the war I shall come back,' he read slowly and deliberately, 'and we will be married. I know that. Marielena Crespi will become my wife. Oh, God, keep her safe and let me survive this awful war.' He looked at von List.

'Well?' he demanded. But von List regarded him blankly.

'Does the name Marielena Crespi mean nothing to you?'

'Why should it?' said von List, utterly at sea.

'You didn't know her home was once Rocca San Michele?'

'Of course not.' If Colonel Clausitz took offence at the other's tone he did not allow his feelings to alter his wide, toothy smile.

'It may interest you to know,' he continued suavely, 'that this girl is known to work for the bandits.'

'I presume you mean partisans, Colonel?' Equally suave.

'Among other things she is known to be the mistress of the leader of the so-called Red Flame Brigade. This band is located in the mountains about seven miles to the west. Within striking distance of this sector. It would seem to me – '

'Why hasn't she been arrested and shot then?'

'Hanged, my dear fellow,' Clausitz corrected gently.

'I do not work for the Field Security Branch,' he went on. 'One imagines they hoped she would lead them to bigger fish, I really don't know.'

'And because Kalbach happened to know her he is automatically suspected of trying to desert to the enemy.'

'Know? He's in love with the girl.'

'All right, so's he's in love with her. Does that make him a traitor? Plenty of other Germans have loved enemy women. French. Dutch. Poles. Even Russians. God Almighty, if we'd shot every German soldier who's slept with a foreign girl we'd

still be burying them.' His eyes darkened with anger; mastering his temper von List listened to the Regimental Commander as he marshalled the facts against Private Kalbach.

'But you will have read Lieutenant Dobermann's report,' he concluded.

'I spoke to him.'

'An admirable report,' said Clausitz. 'A pity we have so few officers of his calibre.'

'I found nothing either in what he said or what he wrote to persuade me of Private Kalbach's guilt,' replied von List evenly

'I interpret the facts otherwise,' said Clausitz.

'And what happens now, Colonel? A quick court-martial to keep everything correct? Or will he simply be strung up on the nearest tree with a placard round his neck? "I have betrayed my comrades"?' His mouth curled in disgust.

'Naturally he'll be given the opportunity to speak in his own defence. A Field Court-Martial will be assembled at once and –'

'And will judge him guilty before they sit down,' said von List, dangerously quiet.

'May I remind you that you're addressing a senior officer,' exclaimed Colonel Clausitz, beginning to bluster.

'Yes,' said von List. He stared meaningly at the front of the other man's perfectly fitting tunic, distressingly bare of worthwhile decorations.

'This conversation is getting us nowhere, Colonel.'

Von List stood up. 'You won't reconsider the matter then?'

'There is nothing to reconsider. Besides, the affair is out of my hands. I could not interfere even if I wanted to.'

'Have I your permission to visit the prisoner?'

Colonel Clausitz nodded. The two men stared at each other with, on one side, mounting hatred tinged with uneasiness, on the other, frank contempt.

'I expect my officers to back me up.'

'Whatever the circumstances,' said von List, fastening the belt round his faded greatcoat. 'You realise, of course, that I shall go to the Divisional Commander.' As he spoke his side contracted with a sudden ripping pain that clenched his teeth.

'These things must be done correctly,' stormed Clausitz, jumping to his feet. 'It would be most improper –' He had to moderate his tone on the appearance of Captain Schiffers. 'Why in hell's name can't you knock?' He switched his rage to his unsuspecting adjutant.

'I am sorry, sir. I beg to report the arrival of the officers detailed for the Court-Martial.' He handed Clausitz a sheet of paper. 'Also I have to report the discovery of two Italian terrorists at the scene of last night's attack.'

'Alive?'

'No, sir. I have to report they are dead.'

Colonel Clausitz swore nastily.

'One of them is a woman,' said Schiffers, with that excitement in his voice often heard when a certain type of man mentions dead women. 'They've been put by the transport section's latrines.' He smirked.

'I shall look at them shortly,' said Clausitz.

'Have I your permission to visit Private Kalbach?' asked von List from the doorway.

'As I know very well that you'd visit him anyway – ' Over the smooth, ruddy face there spread a sickly expression of geniality, belied only by the stony blue glaze of the eyes.

'Look here,' he said, suddenly cordial and understanding. 'Look here, von List, we mustn't let a little matter like this interfere with – '

But von List had gone.

Within the hour four officers sat behind a blanketed table in what had been the priest's house, in a small room badly heated by a smoking stove, and listened to Lieutenant Dobermann giving his evidence in a strong, confident voice. The President, a plump Service Corps Major, had an appalling cold; the others shuffled their feet under the table, trying vainly to keep their toes warm.

Twice while reading out the sentence of death by hanging the President broke off for a violent fit of coughing. No one asked Private Ernst Kalbach whether he had anything to say, but they expected him to salute before he was marched away – after all the cowardly young swine was still a German soldier – back to the freezing little hole where he was to spend the last eighteen hours of his life.

A strange idea of justice, thought the junior member of the Court, but naturally he kept his qualms to himself.

Lieutenant-Colonel von List stood motionless in the glazed sunlight outside Kalbach's prison, with his head slightly on one side, tracing a circle in the snow with the toe of his boot. The sentry watched him as he walked slowly away with one hand pressed to his side.

'You all right in there?' asked the man through the trellis of barbed wire hanging across the open door.

'Yes, thank you,' Kalbach's voice was quite devoid of any feeling.

'Sing out if you want the latrine again.'

There was no answer. The sentry stamped up and down wondering to himself what it could be like to know you were going to die within a few hours. Poor bloody sod, he thought with rough sympathy.

The officer had stopped again; he was staring at the two bodies

in the snow. A corporal of the transport section emerged from the canvas entrance to the latrine, buckling his belt and whistling, and ran smack into an officer with the Oakleaf, Swords and Diamonds at his throat. This sudden little encounter confused the transport corporal so much that he couldn't speak, but merely mouthed like a terrified carp as his disciplined reflexes set the saluting mechanism in motion.

'I beg the Herr Oberst's pardon,' he managed to get out at last.

'These are not very pretty, are they, corporal?'

The man looked down at the crumpled mess in the snow.

'No, Herr Oberst.' He had been in too much of a hurry on his way in to give the bodies more than a quick, disgusted glance.

The corporal had a narrow face blotchy with acne; a remarkably ugly face, but better than the mangled woman lying at their feet: she had no face at all.

'Probably a grenade,' said von List. 'You want to keep clear of grenades, Corporal.'

'Yes, sir.'

'War can be very untidy.' Von List touched the swollen blue flesh with his boot. 'Look at that.' The explosion had stripped all the clothes from the woman except a few blackened shreds embedded in her flanks.

'Have you any children, Corporal?'

'No, Herr Oberst.'

'Well, when you do have a son, you must tell him about this sort of thing. Never forget what you've seen. Tell him everything.' It felt as though the bayonet wound in his body was bursting open. 'Not that he'll listen. Or, even if he does, he won't believe you.' Without another word von List walked away, leaving the transport corporal rooted to the ground scratching the back of his head. He looked at the dead Italians fouling the whiteness of the snow. 'What a bloody awful mess,' he said aloud then went back to his game of cards, breaking into a run to keep warm.

After driving in silence for the first two miles Corporal Jung at last tried to open the conversation.

'The boys don't like this business,' he said. 'And they're going to like it even less if Kalbach swings.' Von List did not reply; his head was sunk deep within the upturned collar of his coat. Jung passed two slow-moving lorries before speaking again.

'How's he taking it, sir?'

'As well as anyone who knows he's going to be dragged out and hanged tomorrow morning.'

Kalbach hadn't said much; he had answered questions as if out of a dream, or a grave. He had shown little interest in this last effort to save him.

'How would you take it, Jung?'

'God knows, sir,' said Corporal Jung frankly. They remained in silence the rest of the way to Divisional Headquarters.

'Nice to see you,' said Colonel Freiburg. 'I'm sorry it couldn't be under happier circumstances.' He knew why von List was here.

'What are the chances?'

The Chief-of-Staff shook his head.

'He's adamant.'

'But, good God the man's innocent! I'm sure of it.'

'You'll have to persuade him of that, and you've only got about half an hour. He's due to leave for a conference by five.'

General Fritschauer smiled as he turned round from his study of the wall map.

'I can give you ten minutes, Karl.' His voice was tired, his face thinner than ever, with the polished look of discoloured ivory about the protruding cheek-bones. He waved to a chair. They were alone.

'I'll get to the point at once, sir. I think you know why I'm here?'

The General nodded.

'Sir, this man has been convicted of something – '

'Of something he didn't do?' The query was very gentle.

'What evidence is there that Private Kalbach ever intended to desert? And that cock and bull story about him trying to go over to the partisans! None of it would stand up for a moment in a proper court of law.'

'I think you must allow me to be the judge of that, Karl.' General Fritschauer limped to his table and slapped a thin sheaf of papers with the back of his hand. 'It's in here,' he said with unaccustomed curtness. 'The whole miserable little story's in here.' He turned over the top page and began to read:

'By the light of the burning truck I saw Private Kalbach running in the direction of the terrorists. His hands were above his head and he was shouting something I could not hear. I knew it was Private Kalbach because I could see the dog he was carrying in his pack.' The General paused.

'Kalbach says he was running at them to throw a grenade,' said von List. 'And I have no reason to doubt his story. He has always been a good soldier.'

'And Lieutenant Dobermann, isn't he also a good soldier?'

'Yes, sir, he is.'

'Yet you prefer to take the word of a very young private soldier rather than that of an officer?'

'You know the confusion of a night attack,' said von List. 'There was heavy shelling. Lieutenant Dobermann might easily have made a mistake – for God's sake, sir, is a man to hang because of something thought to have been seen by the light of a burning truck? Doesn't he get a chance to defend himself?'

'Karl! Please remember whom you're addressing.'

'My apologies, sir.' Von List stared at him with blazing anger. At his age, thought the General – yes, he was indeed Mar-

garethe's son. There had been times when she had faced him like this, with the proud, angry spirit flashing in her beautiful eyes.

'I know how you feel, Karl,' he said sadly. 'In the last war I argued with a senior officer over a case very like this. If it's any consolation, he was right. Already there have been cases in certain other divisions, but until now – and this is no reflection on you, Karl – we have had none in this division. And I have no intention of allowing any such nonsense to spread.'

'So he is to be made an example, is that it?'

'Yes, he is to be made an example, if that is how you prefer to put it.' He began to read from the report again.

'I did not see Private Kalbach again. When the Company reached Rocca San Michele he was officially reported as missing . . . etcetera, etcetera.' General Fritschauer's hand went to his empty sleeve, the fingers clutching at the stump of his arm.

'Until he was picked up – without his rifle – by a party from Headquarters of 68th Regiment early this morning.' Was it only this morning? To von List it felt as if a hundred days had passed.

'He claims he got lost, cut off during the shelling, and decided to stay where he was until daylight. It was as he came down to the road in the early morning that he was picked up by the Headquarters troops.' The General looked at his watch.

'Many innocent men die in war,' he said. 'Many of the guilty ones escape. Because in war there is no judge but God.'

'There are times when God seems to be blind,' replied von List bitterly.

'One presumes because He is so utterly appalled by what is going on everywhere in His name,' said the General with an irony equally bitter. 'And now, Karl, I have to go.'

'You won't change your mind, sir?'

'No. I cannot.'

Colonel Freiburg put his head round the door. 'Excuse me, General, but I think it's time you started.'

'Thank you, I shall be there.' To von List he said, 'Don't be too bitter about this. One day perhaps you will understand what it is like to make such a decision. What it is like to sit on a cold and lonely pinnacle encased within a general's uniform and holding the lives and deaths of eight thousand men in hands that can never be entirely clean of someone's blood.'

'For the example to be effective, must he hang?'

'You'd rather he faced a firing-squad?'

'Yes,' said Karl von List. 'And I think I am speaking for every man in my battalion.'

'Very well then.' General Fritschauer pulled on the leather glove with his teeth.

'I shall be seeing Private Kalbach again,' said Karl quietly. 'Have I your authority for telling him he will be shot?'

'Yes, Karl.' In the shadow of the peaked cap the General's face

looked more skull-like than ever and exhausted beyond belief. In the doorway he turned.

'Your mother would have known I was doing my duty,' he said, adding, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible, 'but she would never have forgiven me. And that is the hardest thing of all to bear.'

Karl stood alone, lost in thought, hardly noticing the entrance of Private Schimpf to put up the black-out boards. The lamps cast a warmer glow than the grey afternoon light and the little orderly's shadow chased about the ceiling like some weird, dancing gnome as he busied himself at the stove. But Karl never moved, never spoke, and Schimpf went out in silence. The purring of the lamps was the only sound in the room. Then the harsh buzz of the telephone jerked von List from his sombre thoughts.

'Is that you, Freiburg? Who? Ah, yes. Would you get him, please. It's Colonel Bachner.'

He shouted down the passage for Freiburg.

'Hang on a moment,' said the latter as he took the receiver. 'I'd like to talk to you before you go.' Von List waited while the Chief-of-Staff argued with Bachner about ammunition for the Divisional artillery.

'I don't care what the Army Order says,' shouted Freiburg in conclusion. 'All right then, you'd better send us a supply of catapults.' He banged down the receiver. 'It isn't his fault. There just aren't enough shells to go round. I don't know how we're going to fight this damned war.'

'Does it matter,' said von List wearily. 'Provided we go on killing. Isn't that the main thing?'

Colonel Freiburg glanced at him with raised eyebrows.

'You need a drink,' he said heartily. Then his voice changed. 'Look, I've seen him make a decision involving a thousand men ten times quicker than the time he took over this one.'

'Why did he do it? For God's sake why did he put his name to such a thing?'

'Because he considers the man guilty.'

'Is that the only reason?'

'He might conceivably have got away with punishment battalion, but – '

'But an example must be made.'

Freiburg nodded slowly. 'You must admit the evidence is pretty damning. And all that part about the Italian girl.'

'Colonel Clausitz claims she's working with the partisans.'

'She is. There's definite proof of that. Part of her job is to squeeze as much information out of as many Germans, both officers and men, as she can get – usually by the oldest method of all. This man of yours seems to have been one of the suckers, I'm afraid.'

'What on earth could they hope to get out of a private soldier?'

'Well, for one thing she found out when your battalion was returning to the line. For all we know he may have told her other tit-bits. It may not surprise you that Clausitz wanted to have him turned over to the Gestapo. But this General of ours is not an S.S. butcher, whatever you may be thinking of him at the moment. Great heavens, man, you ought to know him well enough to realise how much he's hating the whole rotten business.'

'He's changed,' said von List. 'He's not the man I knew before the war.'

'If it comes to that, are any of us?' Colonel Freiburg gave a short laugh. 'Now, are you coming for that drink?'

'No, I must get back. There's a man waiting for me.' Von List straightened up, then he let out a long sigh.

'How the hell do you tell a man he's been granted the great privilege of being finished off by bullets instead of a rope?'

'I don't envy you,' said Freiburg very seriously, shaking his head slowly. 'No, I don't envy you,' he repeated. 'Not one little bit.'

They drove to Regimental Headquarters through the deepening dusk. At once Corporal Jung had seen by the look on von List's face that he had been unsuccessful and so the journey passed in almost total silence. As darkness came to hide the German back areas the roads woke to life, filling with lorries and marching men.

'Can't you go any faster, Jung?'

To Kalbach every minute must surely seem like a lifetime.

'I'm doing my best, Herr Oberst,' growled Jung in an injured voice.

'Well, keep on doing it.'

Helped by the cold reflection of the searchlights on the snow they made good time, swerving in and out among a heavy stuff like an agile mouse negotiating a path between a procession of elephants, leaving behind them a crowd of cursing drivers.

'Wait here, Jung. I shan't be long.'

Corporal Jung settled down in his seat and lit a cigarette. Von List stood a little way off. Wondering what to tell the poor devil, thought Jung. Christ, who'd be a bloody officer! Always condemning people to death, one way and another.

The searchlights had gone out, for the moon was rising to take their place, frozen radiance outlining the eastern peaks. Von List looked up at the winter stars. There is no help to be found up there, thought the human part of his mind, nor comfort either; a good night for aircraft, registered the professional part. Why don't they come and wipe him out with a bomb? Get it over.

'Colonel von List. I want to see the prisoner.' The sentry clicked his heels smartly.

'A cold night for standing about,' said the officer, putting off

the moment of going in.

'It certainly is, sir,' said the sentry, happy enough to exchange a few words with anyone. He drew aside the wire, now hung with sacks to hide the light of Private Kalbach's single candle.

Kalbach got up off the straw and stood to attention; a grey blanket hung from his thin shoulders like a cloak. His little dog growled warningly.

'It's all right, Trudi. It's a friend.' He smiled at von List.

'She thinks you've come to steal my things, sir.' In the silence Kalbach's breathing was loud and hurried.

'I've spoken to the General,' said von List. And, from the way he spoke, Kalbach knew the answer. For an instant he shut his eyes and screwed up his face like a child about to cry; he swayed slightly as though struck by a sudden fierce gust of wind, and von List, thinking he was going to faint, put out a hand to steady him.

'I'm all right, sir. Have I your permission to sit down?'

Von List sat beside him on the crackling straw. Kalbach's hand fondled Trudi's ears and gently stroked her head.

'I am very sorry,' said von List.

'I know you did your best, Herr Oberst.'

Von List picked up a length of straw and began breaking it into neat little pieces.

'The sentence has been altered to shooting,' he said, speaking very quickly. Kalbach did not say anything; he sat bowed under the grey blanket, his hand motionless on Trudi's back.

'Thank you,' he said after a pause. 'That will be quicker, won't it, Herr Oberst?'

'Yes, it'll be much quicker.'

'Corporal Wiederheim was on a firing-squad detail once. He told us about it. He said – ' Kalbach broke off, choking slightly. Von List saw the glint of tears on the boy's cheeks.

'You're a very brave man,' he said firmly. Kalbach brushed at his eyes with a corner of the blanket.

'I hope – I don't want – tomorrow – ' He couldn't get it out.

'Would you like me to stay with you?'

'Thank you, Herr Oberst, but the boys may need you. No, I've got her.' Trudi showed her small teeth in a grin. There was another long pause.

'Excuse me asking this, sir, but would – '

'Yes?'

'Could I ask the Herr Oberst to take care of her?' He hurried on quickly, the words almost tripping over each other. 'She's no trouble at all. And I'm sure Private Schulz could feed her – there are bound to be scraps in the officers' mess, and she likes broken biscuit and – '

'Of course I'll look after her,' exclaimed von List roughly.

'I'd have asked Heinrich – Private Kumitsch – but he's not really very good with her. You do *like* animals, don't you, sir?'

'Yes, Kalbach, I do. And so does my wife.'

'Perhaps you'll take her back to Germany after the war?' A hand-siren began to wail outside and loud voices shouted orders; feet went pounding by in the snow. Some way away guns began firing. The night throbbed faintly with aircraft engines.

'Bologna,' said Kalbach, then, in the next breath: 'They said she was working with the partisans. Well, why not? She's only fighting for her country, like we are. Isn't that right, Herr Oberst?'

'Yes.'

'If they get her, what will they do?'

'There's no reason why they should. She'll be somewhere safely in the mountains by now.' The engines were much louder and all along the moonlit route to the city the sky shook from the winking shellbursts.

'Should you ever meet her, Herr Oberst, tell her I understand.' They could hear the distant whistle of bombs.

'Yes, Kalbach, I will.' No one had mentioned her name.

'Put out that bloody cigarette,' yelled a loud, frightened voice somewhere.

'Ah, go and stuff yourself!'

The roar of the engines was deafening. Von List had to raise his voice.

'Is there anything you'd like me to do?'

'My mother, sir. Do you have to tell her? Not everything?'

'No, not everything.'

He was standing above the hunched grey figure.

'Get that light out!' The voice was just outside. 'Get it out, I tell you!'

'The candle, Herr Oberst,' warned the sentry. 'I think he means the candle.'

Von List pinched the flame between his finger and thumb. Trudi growled at the sudden darkness, lit now and then by the flash of the guns firing just beyond the village.

'She'd always hoped for a hero son,' said Kalbach. 'Like my father. He died when I was two, of wounds he got at Passchendaele. They gave him an Iron Cross. I wouldn't want her to know – '

'She won't. I promise you. Now I must go.' Von List felt the hard earth of the floor trembling beneath his feet. Flakes of plaster fell across his face.

'By Christ,' shouted Corporal Jung, 'They've got one!' The sacking billowed as the bomber exploded. Encouraged, the guns redoubled their efforts, pumping the shells into the excited sky at a great rate.

'It doesn't seem important any more,' said Ernst Kalbach, still sitting in the straw. 'Why is this happening to me?' he cried suddenly.

'I suppose God knows.'

'Will you be there, Herr Oberst? Tomorrow.'

'If you want –'

'Yes, sir, I do.'

He stood to attention when his officer left, then he sat down and sat staring open-eyed into the flashing darkness, slowly caressing the little dog which snuggled close. Once or twice he shivered violently as though with a fever.

'What will it be like?' he whispered. 'O Lord, what will it be like?' In answer Trudi licked his hand.

'Let's get out of here!' Von List slammed the car door. 'You heard me, Jung. Hurry it up, for God's sake!'

A few snowflakes tumbled softly from the bitter dawn sky, muffling the measured steps of the firing party as they marched to their position. Exactly as the winter sun came over the mountains touching the peaks with pale flamingo fire, so Private Ernst Kalbach, only son of the widowed Frau Kalbach, was brought out by two field-security men with faces as hard as the frozen snow. They led him past the waiting firing party, and the men who were to do him to death looked away, moving their boots uneasily until ordered harshly to stand still by the sergeant.

A small bare oak-tree stood beside a cliff of black rock, glazed with ice and hung with clusters of long white icicles. They bound him to the tree with the swift movements that betrayed considerable experience in such matters, then marched away like grey automatons to turn about smartly and stand themselves at ease with the proud precision of men who know they are performing a duty well.

Lieutenant-Colonel von List, watching with pity and disgust, was reminded of some pagan sacrifice where the victim was slaughtered at the very moment the sunlight struck down upon his heart. Beside him Colonel Freiburg, attending on behalf of the Divisional Commander, to see that the miserable business was carried out with the minimum of delay and the maximum humaneness, muttered under his breath,

'Let's get it over with.'

Colonel Clausitz stepped forward, clearing his throat, and holding his head well up, began to read in rapid tones. Von List hardly heard the words of the charge and the sentence, '. . . that on the night of the fifteenth of January . . . did attempt to desert to the enemy . . .' He could not take his eyes from Kalbach. The only one present without a greatcoat, he was blue with cold, and only the thin cord binding his arms behind him and to the tree prevented him from jumping up and down and swinging his arms across his chest. O God, he prayed silently, O God, help me to die well and help me to stop shaking; if they see me tremble they'll think I'm afraid. He also did not hear the words of the

charge, all of which were lies, but he was the only person to know they were lies. Private Kalbach looked across the glittering snow, screwing up his eyes against the mounting sun. The burly Colonel in a fur-collared coat reading in a rough jerky voice; von List and Chaplain Maulhard; the short rank of men with their rifles at ease; the officer coming towards him carrying a white disc and a length of black cloth.

'. . . the soldier's honour is embodied in the unconditional surrender of his person . . . even to the sacrifice of his life.' Colonel Clausitz was reading from the 'Duties of a German Soldier', almost gabbling the words. The joke's gone too far, thought von List bitterly, everything's out of control; you hadn't visualised this, had you? The paper shook slightly in Clausitz's gloved hand.

'. . . the highest soldierly virtue is martial courage . . . ' The officer pinned the disc over Kalbach's heart, lifted the black bandage towards his eyes.

'Please, sir, not yet, just a moment more – please.'

The officer hesitated. He was young and nervous and hating his task.

'I'm sorry,' he muttered. 'I'm very sorry.' But he did not cut off Kalbach's last view of life, and stood waiting for the Regimental Commander to finish.

'. . . Cowardice is disgraceful . . . '

Kalbach turned his head from side to side, slowly, drinking in the last few moments of life, so indescribably precious. Beyond the helmeted heads of his executioners the summit of Monte Colle shone with a most beautiful brilliance and, as he watched, tiny plumes of snow leapt, no bigger than bullet-splashes. It's not my war any more, he thought with a sudden strange feeling of empty detachment. Poor Heinrich, he thought, everything's uncertainty for him. But I know. I am unique among these men. I am beyond hope. I know. I feel no fear of death, only of the moment when the bandage is put across my eyes to blot out the sun for ever.

Then a cock crowed and at the shrill, homely sound the tears came to Kalbach's eyes and rolled slowly down his ashen cheeks.

'Obedience is the foundation of the Wehrmacht,' read Colonel Clausitz, 'and confidence the basis of obedience . . . ' He shut his mouth with a snap, folded up the paper and shoved it in his pocket.

'Do you wish to speak to the prisoner?' he asked von List in a low voice. Von List shook his head. What could he do? Leap forward and make an impassioned harangue? Tear off his decorations and badges of rank in protest? He knew that what was about to happen was wrong. And yet was it more wrong than a thousand savage incidents of war he himself had witnessed without a tremor? We are the cowards, we who stand and watch and

make excuses for our inaction. He shook his head again. Why prolong the agony? Anyway, a man just about to die doesn't want speeches. The words are not going with him.

'Padre?'

Chaplain Maulhard raised his head from his prayer-book.

'Yes, Herr Oberst, with your permission.'

'Keep it short,' said von List curtly.

Some distance away, half-hidden by the buildings, three tank men had stopped work on their machine and were watching.

'The Church is with him now,' said one, lighting a cigarette.

'He'll soon be on his way,' said the second, wiping his hands on oily waste. It was not the first execution he had witnessed.

'Poor bastard,' said the third.

'It makes you think.'

'It makes you think that this bloody war should be over and done with,' growled the one with the oily waste. The cock crowed again.

'He's for the pot,' said the driver. 'We'll get him tonight.'

'The Church has finished.'

Chaplain Maulhard turned away from Private Kalbach. 'And may God have mercy on his soul,' he cried in a ringing voice.

'Amen,' murmured one of the Panzer men fervently.

The young officer took Maulhard's place.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered again. This time he tied the bandage round Kalbach's eyes. 'No. No.' Kalbach struggled and threw his head about, straining desperately for light.

'Stand still, can't you,' urged the officer, fumbling clumsily with the knot. 'I have to do it.'

'Hurry up there,' shouted von List. 'Get it fixed.'

Kalbach stood rigid in utter blackness, suddenly terribly frightened. Colonel Clausitz was pacing up and down. For a moment or two they heard Kalbach's little gasping moans. Colonel Freiburg was cursing under his breath, steadily and fluently.

'Christ,' exclaimed the tank driver, 'I'd rather see it coming.'

'How d'you know? It isn't you who's being shot.'

The officer in command of the firing-squad marched stiffly back to his men, scattering the snow crystals in sharp little flurries. Taking up his position to a flank he looked across at Colonel Clausitz.

The latter nodded slightly. In a voice that was unnaturally shrill the officer called the riflemen to attention. Their boots made little sound in the snow; their faces showed nothing.

'*Load!*'

Von List saw Kalbach's body stiffen at the ugly rattle of the bolts.

'Here we go,' said the Panzer man who was smoking. 'It must be bloody awful behind that bandage.'

'Poor bastard,' repeated his companion. 'Poor miserable bastard.'

'*Aim!*'

Von List saw Kalbach's head draw back swiftly as if trying to escape a blow. O God! O God! O God! Kalbach was mouthing silently.

'*Fire!*'

The crash of the volley was hurled back by the cliff and the icicles shattered into flashing splinters. Kalbach's body, which had leapt and arched at the strike of the bullets, now sagged from the tree, grotesquely supported by the cords; blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and the small snowflakes settled on his tidy hair.

Medical Officer Buchner, who had been standing apart from the others, went forward in company with the young officer, to pronounce official death, while the firing party regarded their handiwork with simulated indifference.

Life still glowed in Kalbach's eyes and his mouth still twitched. Von List saw Buchner shake his head; saw the officer draw his pistol and raise it to Kalbach's neck. As the single shot rang out von List walked quickly away.

'Von List!' He heard Clausitz calling his name but did not halt or look back. He felt sick and ashamed and knew he could not trust himself to speak.

'That's one of them who didn't like it,' remarked the tank man who had seen other executions as von List went by.

'It's the First Battalion C.O. The one with the Swords and Diamonds.'

'Looks as if he's going to throw up. Come on, lads, the show's over. Let's get this bloody gun sorted.'

But the man who had said 'Amen' kept on glancing across to the little oak-tree. When it was all over and nothing remained but the reddened disc and a length of frayed cord he tried to concentrate on the job.

'If you wouldn't mind,' said the driver sarcastically, 'we'd like to get finished by breakfast. Come on, Otto,' he added more kindly. 'You've mown 'em down by the score with this little gun of yours. Besides, he never felt a thing. Over just like that.'

'How do you know?' the gunner burst out with sudden fury. 'How the hell d'you know?'

The snowflakes still came tumbling from the livid morning sky, settling very gently on the bloodied snow; gently, tenderly, like a sheet being drawn with sorrow and love across the face of a dead friend.

2

AFTER his return to Battalion Headquarters Lieutenant-Colonel von List was very quiet, hardly opening his mouth unless personally addressed. Captain Stempfe, attempting some little pleasantry, had his startled head bitten off; even Major Holmers received short, curt answers to his various problems. Among them only Sergeant-Major Tomas had seen von List in this mood before.

'Private Kumitsch has just reported back from leave, sir,' he said in the voice he would have used in church. Yes, he'd been just like this when half the platoon had been written off in the useless bloody counter-attack against the Ivan tanks in that stinking little village near Smolensk. Couldn't talk to him for damned near a week. Black as hell, he'd been, till he'd worked it off in vodka.

'I'll see him outside.'

The snow which had fallen gently on Kalbach's execution was now coming down quite heavily, swirling in a rising wind.

'It's too damned cold to stand about,' said von List. 'We'll walk.' As they walked up and down, Kumitsch told him about his leave.

'But I know they're alive, sir. I know I'll find them one day.'

'I hope so. But don't bank on it. This war's got fat on broken hopes.' The snow was cold against his lips.

'It is true about Private Kalbach, Herr Oberst?'

'Yes,' said von List.

'They shot him? Just like that?'

'Yes.'

'Ernst would never have run away. He hated the shells, but he'd never have run away. Never.'

'No,' said von List. 'He was a close friend of yours?'

'We knew each other before we were called up, sir. It's – it's – Ernst was a good person.' The colour had risen in Kumitsch's thin cheeks.

'This will be no consolation, Kumitsch, but I've seen a great many men die, and very few did it better than your friend. And now you must get back to your job as a machine-gunner. That's all that matters. D'you understand that, Kumitsch? Don't let this get into your mind.'

'No, sir,' said Private Kumitsch flatly.

Von List went to write a letter to the widow who had hoped for her son to be a hero. Kumitsch returned to his Company, in a ferment over Kalbach's death.

By the evening the snowstorm had assumed the proportions of

a minor blizzard. Three officers sat close to the fire in the mess listening to the heavy rush of the wind across the roof. Two of them held half-empty glasses in their hands; the third poked at the chestnuts splitting black in the hot ashes. No one had spoken for some time. Lieutenant Huth came into the room with Chaplain Maulhard; their shoulders were white with snow.

'My goodness, it's quite a storm,' exclaimed Huth. His face was red from the wind, his eyes shone enthusiastically.

'Evening, Padre,' said Major Holmers.

'Have a drink,' said Medical Officer Buchner. 'Give him a stiff schnapps, Huth.'

Von List looked up and nodded without speaking.

'Well, perhaps just a small one.' Chaplain Maulhard was an earnest young man with a prominent Adam's apple and a long, red nose.

'To what do we owe the honour of this visit, Padre?' Buchner watched Maulhard spluttering over the fiery drink.

'I fear the road back to Regimental Headquarters will be impossible.' His eyes started and watered from his efforts to stop choking.

'Then you'd better stay and get tight with us.'

The Chaplain smiled wanly.

'God won't mind. He's taking a day off today.'

It was Huth who broke the little silence.

'I suppose compared with Russia this is nothing,' he said to the room in general. Von List looked at the young face from dark, thoughtful eyes, then went back to staring at his glass.

'What *was* Russia like?' asked Huth eagerly.

'What was it like, Buchner?' Von List gazed into the flames. Russia was eighty degrees of frost and only summer uniforms; it was the dead hard as concrete and the tears freezing in living eyes; it was the huge Stalin tanks going over carpets of wounded men. Russia was the blinding dust of the steppes; a thousand little villages burning; a small starving child squatting beside its headless mother. Russia was the '*urrah, urrah*' of her swarming infantry; it was a Tartar face with savage slanting eyes and a bayonet that went in like white-hot flame . . .

'Russia was bloody awful,' said Buchner. 'In the land of the Ivans the armies were angry, Huth. It was not the war of gentlemen. Is that right, sir?'

Von List nodded silently.

'No machine-guns,' said Buchner. 'The oil froze. No tanks. No trucks. The oil froze. Then when the armour was done for the snow came and with it the armies they hadn't got. Eighty divisions, Huth, from the East, from Siberia, and all dressed up nice and cosy with everything white, men, tanks, guns – the whole bloody outfit white and warm. You don't want to go to Russia, Huth. You don't even want to talk about it.' He reached for the

bottle. 'No, you want to thank whatever God you believe in that you're safe and snug in sunny Italy, my lad. The land of grapes and firing-squads.' He steered a glowing chestnut from the ash.

'Did you send him on his way with a few well-chosen words, Padre?' Buchner swore as the chestnut burnt his fingers. 'Did he – '

'There's no need to be offensive,' said von List, rousing himself from his thoughts. 'I know how we all feel about what happened this morning – '

'No hard feelings, Padre,' said Buchner, blowing on the skinned chestnut.

'I quite understand,' said Chaplain Maulhard. He had been considerably upset by the unpleasant events of the morning.

Von List slid back into his own private world. He had already drunk much more than his normal modest quota; he knew he wasn't going to stop there. All right, so he was going to get drunk. If they come tonight I'll go out and meet them with a rifle in my hand; I'll leave this bloody chair and join my poor, bloody men, where I ought to be.

'Been doing any more of your splendid drawings, Huth?' he asked, fighting the fatigue, the fever and fumes of the alcohol.

'There doesn't seem much time these days, Herr Oberst.'

'To hell with the Herr Oberst,' von List smiled. 'But only for this evening.' Huth's eyes were like saucers.

'Drink up, gentlemen,' said Lieutenant-Colonel von List, slowly and distinctly. 'This has been a long, hard day.'

He sat and listened with part of his brain as the others talked, his head sunk in his shoulders, his chin touching the little metal cross. There was a tight feeling above his eyes, and the thoughts darted through his mind like insects across a dark and brooding pool. Ziegler was dead. A wretched boy was dead. If they met, Ziegler would forgive him with a laugh, for Ziegler, alive or dead, was that kind of man. It was all a mistake, come and have a drink; that was Ziegler.

' . . . where did you say you came from, Padre?'

'Dachau.'

Wasn't that one of the places where Germany was proving herself capable of ruling the world? Or did they spell it Belsen?

'A pretty little place,' said Buchner. 'Or so they tell me . . . '

The girl still led her donkey across the dirty white wall, hidden within the head-scarf. He longed to jump up and tear it off and so get a proper glimpse of her face. Hadn't someone eaten the donkey? Or was it the girl they'd eaten?

' . . . But tell me, Padre . . . ' Buchner's clinical voice. 'How does the Church equate the hard-working, patriotic and God-fearing inhabitants of your pretty little village with what one understands is taking place just across the road? Tell me that.' Look at Holmers there, puffing away at that pipe of his, saying

nothing. When people started to talk like this much better to listen and say nothing; much less tiring. The brandy no longer tasted of anything. Brown water, full of dreams, bringing oblivion . . . 'Is that all you've got to say, Padre? Shame on you, man. But then the Church has always been notoriously free of a conscience. An annoying appendage, a conscience. One day perhaps science will take a scalpel and cut it out. Imagine that. The dustbins would soon be spilling over with unwanted consciences.'

The Chaplain soon gave restless indications of wanting to leave.

'Find the Padre somewhere to sleep, Herr Huth,' said von List suddenly. The Chaplain hadn't done badly this morning; as those sort of speeches went his could have been worse.

'Sleep well, my dear fellow.' Von List waved his hand in a small, gracious gesture. 'And don't worry about friend Buchner; he only means half of it. If you don't mind, Holmers, I'll have a chestnut.' He hardly felt the heat of the hard, shiny core.

'And now I'm going to my room. If you care to look in, Major Holmers, and drink your hot nightcap with me I shall be most honoured. And you, Herr Doktor.'

Buchner excused himself. 'I have some patients to look at.'

'Shot and shell, or aches and pains?'

'Shot and shell, sir. Italian bullets.'

'Make them comfortable, Herr Doktor.' Von List was perfectly steady on his feet. He was tidy as ever and his speech was very clear. Only his eyes showed how much he had drunk.

'I will, Herr Oberst.'

'If they're too bad, make it permanent, Herr Doktor, there's a good fellow. They'll thank you for it sometime, somewhere.'

In his room von List removed the Knight's Cross and tossed it carelessly on to the little table by the bed; he drew off his boots, undid his tunic, fumbling slightly with the buttons, and lay down on the bed, moving with a kind of dignified deliberation. Major Holmers sat on the only chair, once the property of Signor Crespi. Tufts of horsehair burst from two or three places.

'Holmers,' said von List to the ceiling, 'I am rather drunk.'

'Yes,' agreed Major Holmers equably.

'If anything happens tonight I – '

'If anything happens you'll put your head in a basin of cold water and be perfectly capable of commanding the battalion.'

'Not if I go on drinking. Which I have every intention of doing.' Von List raised himself to refill his glass.

'And I have no intention of trying to stop you,' said Holmers, relighting his pipe.

'So we understand each other.'

'I think so.'

'You're a good fellow, Holmers.'

He lay back and closed his eyes. He looks much younger,

thought the other man. The deep furrows between the thick eyebrows lessened and the forehead lines smoothed away, but the mouth did not slacken. A little brandy shone in one of the starfish scars. Hearing a rustle Holmers glanced at the corner of the room. A small face with crumpled ears and wet black nose rested on the edge of the mortar-bomb box and two sharp brown eyes watched him unwinkingly. He put out his hand and white teeth showed in a quick, silent snarl.

'She doesn't like us,' said von List. 'Why should she? We allowed her world to be destroyed. And we didn't lift a finger to stop it. Not a finger,' he repeated in a tone of angry amazement. 'God, what a bloody useless way to die.'

'Any more useless than Ziegler? Knocked off walking along a road in the dark? It's all useless. Like it was last time.' Major Holmers looked into the little red bowl of his pipe. The room shook to a sudden outburst of gunfire, muffled by the sullen roar of the blizzard.

'No guns tomorrow, Holmers. The Colonel will have a hangover. So no guns please. Make it an Army Order.'

'Of course.'

'Besides, the dog doesn't like them. *I* don't like them. No one likes them. Why the hell can't they stop then? For good. Will they ever stop? Have we got to wake up to their filthy noise for the rest of our lives? Well, have we? You're a knowledgeable fellow, Holmers. Surely you can tell me.'

'This is what we asked in '18,' replied Holmers quietly.

'And yet it all happened again.'

'You were too young to know what defeat really means.' For an instant the eyes of the older man clouded.

'Defeat, and a country full of men who knew nothing except how to fire a machine-gun. Bitter men. Like I was. Soldiers looking for a job, the only one they knew. We joined the ex-service organisations. I became a member of *Stahlhelm* and banged my beer mug with the best of them, roaring for vengeance, for the chance to try again and show the world we were still the best soldiers. To keep in practice we shot down our own people in Munich and Berlin. We were the lowest of the low; that's what they called the officers of the Reichswehr.' He put his pipe in his pocket. The guns had stopped but the wind still swept round the building in vicious gusts.

'For a few short years war was out of fashion, even in Germany,' he said. 'But not for long. We got our chance.' Major Holmers paused. 'Perhaps it's our last one, perhaps not. That depends on how we spend our time during this next spell of peace.' He passed his hand wearily across his eyes.

'The Zieglers, the Tellings, the Kalbachs, the Huths, are they all to go?' cried von List, raising himself on his elbows. 'Is nothing to be left but ruins occupied by a horde of cripples in

tattered uniforms?'

'Someone must be there to rebuild Germany. Or is she to be left rotting like a bloody black scar in the middle of Europe? Perhaps that's it. Perhaps – ' For the first time his speech was slightly slurred.

'We'll put her back on the map,' Holmers assured him. 'We did it last time.'

'And, if we get another Hitler, we'll do it again. Is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Hitler! The Supreme Corporal! Our Führer!'

'You followed him. We all followed him. At first, because he gave us back our pride. Then, willingly when he led us to victory.'

'And now?'

'Now?' Holmers shrugged. 'Who wants to end up on a meat-hook?'

'But if another gifted corporal should turn up when this war's over, then we'll follow him, I suppose?'

'Very likely,' said Holmers.

Von List had fallen back on his pillow; his face was very flushed, his eyes very bright.

'So we go on to the bitter end,' he said. Then he imitated the stuttering sound of a machine-gun. 'Till we've got grey beards down to our ankles. God, my head's spinning like a bloody top.' His eyes closed.

'I'm going to bed.' Holmers emptied his glass and stretched widely.

'That's right, my dear fellow, you do that. Be fresh in the morning. Must be fresh. *Bang, bang.*' Trudi barked, standing up in the mortar-box.

'Tell her to shut up. Why can't she whisper? Tell her to whisper. Go on, Major, tell her. My God, I feel dizzy. All those trains. Bombs. Nasty things, bombs. Horrible black eggs, that's what they're like. Black eggs. I say, Holmers.' Major Holmers bent down to catch the mumbled words.

'Are you there, Holmers? D'you think my wife wants a dead hero? No, she wants a nice warm live husband, that's what she wants. That's what they all want. Don't go 'way. That's what Frau Kalbach wanted, a nice warm hero. What did she get? Tell me what she got, Holmers. A letter from me. A bloody piece of paper covered in bloody lies, that's what she got.'

Major Holmers pulled the blanket over him.

'Perhaps when I'm a general I'll be able to stand people up against walls. That'll be fun, oh, my God, that'll be fun.'

'You'll never be a general,' said Holmers with the first trace of real bitterness. 'You think too much of the men.'

'That's nice, Holmers, that's very nice.' He was swimming away into spinning darkness.

'Must apologise,' he muttered thickly. 'Got to apologise. Took

your job away. Sorry about that. After the war . . . come and stay. Ledi would like you. Tell her all about the Fourth Reich, she'd enjoy . . . '

Overcome by the fatigue of his long journey, the varied and unpleasant events of the last thirty-six hours and the potency of the brandy, Lieutenant-Colonel Karl von List for only the second time in his life passed quietly out.

3

'I've got a job for you,' said Lieutenant Dobermann. It was the hour before dawn and they were alone in the Headquarters bunker; next door everyone snored in their blankets except the signaller reading an old copy of one of the front-line newspapers.

As Sergeant Telling did not answer but merely stared at him coldly with his one eye, the Lieutenant had to continue.

'Number Five observation post needs repairing,' he said, extra loudly, for he was secretly rather frightened of the gaunt, battered N.C.O. Still Telling was silent, though a slight curl of his long upper lip showed that he had heard quite well.

'I want it seen to,' said Dobermann curtly.

Sergeant Telling considered this an excessively stupid scheme, but being a soldier of the old Wehrmacht he merely allowed a look of dumb insolence to pass across his face before answering,

'Very well, Lieutenant.'

'You'll take four men with you and – '

'Begging the Lieutenant's pardon, but I'll go alone.'

'What did you say? What d'you mean, Sergeant?' Dobermann blustered.

'I know exactly what that post should look like from the front,' went on Telling calmly. 'If there's a rock out of place some Tommy with eyes in his head is going to spot it and bang goes Number Five o.p. Still, it's up to you,' he concluded magnanimously.

'It certainly is.' Dobermann glowered at the map on the table before him. 'All right then, go by yourself.'

'Thank you, Lieutenant.' If it hadn't been for you, you blond bastard, Kalbach might still be alive.

'A bit death or glory, isn't it?' asked Telling after an unpleasant interval. 'Why not wait till tonight?'

'Because I say it's to be done now, that's why, Sergeant. As the place is it cannot be occupied.' Dobermann picked up the automatic pistol he had been cleaning and ran his finger along the

barrel, enjoying the feel of the oily steel. He opened the breech two or three times, letting it snap shut with a sharp clash.

'Do I take it you don't want to go?' he asked, studying the oil on his finger.

'Only a madman would want to go out on the front of this bloody mountain with daylight coming up,' said Telling quite amiably.

'You're not losing your nerve, are you, Sergeant?' suggested the officer softly. Telling looked at him for quite a time without expression. I killed my first man when you were still guzzling at your mother, he reminded himself. One of these days, little master Dobermann, you're going to wind up with a German bullet in the back of that thick skull of yours; especially with the company in its present ugly mood. Cheered by the thought, Telling smiled cruelly.

'With all the respect due to a fully fledged Lieutenant, I beg to request that, when my nerve goes, I may use the Lieutenant's shoulder on which to weep?' He had snapped to attention and barked out the words as if making a respectful application for leave or a posting. Stupefied by such impertinence, Dobermann gaped at the wooden face above him; the blood came flooding to his thick neck.

'Permission requested to carry out the Lieutenant's order.' A spark flickered in the single eye.

'Get out!' Dobermann exclaimed in a muffled voice.

'*Jawohl*, Herr Leutnant.' Sergeant Telling saluted smartly.

* * *

At home, in the bosom of his Paisley family, Corporal Bryson was the mildest and most good-natured of men. But he was not at home; he was many hundreds of miles from the soft, smothering influence of his devoted mother; he was stuck in the Italian mountains. And in those surroundings he became a very different being.

'Have I your permission to go out today, sir?' he asked his company commander.

'You really enjoy crawling about in the snow with that rifle of yours, don't you, Corporal Bryson?'

The corporal nodded happily. 'Yessir. Helps to pass the time.'

He had the face and expression of a contented little boy, and gentle brown eyes. Yet as a sniper Corporal Bryson had few equals. In true gunman style he notched the butt of his most deadly rifle. At the present moment he was at number nineteen and desperate to make the full score before his battalion left the line.

'Good weather for my job,' he said. 'Snow showers suddenly lifting. They come out on a day like this.' He might have been discussing the habits of lice.

'All right then,' said Major Lumsden rather unwillingly. 'But for God's sake don't get out of hand, not at this stage of the war. It's damned well not worth it, Bryson.'

'No sir.'

'Besides, I don't want a bloody great stonk all over us.'

'I'll watch it, sir,' said Corporal Bryson with all the confidence of a man on a job he knows he does supremely well.

* * *

The sniper, clothed entirely in white, made his way swiftly to one of his favourite killing-points among the rocks of Point 512, moving under cover of the dawn snow shower. Point 512 was a nasty little hillock wanted by neither side overlooking the San Martino track. This track had provided Bryson with numbers fifteen and seventeen. He was not in the least afraid quite on his own in No Man's Land. If an enemy loomed suddenly from the murk he knew he could melt at once into the snow. Exhilarated and tingling from the touch of the frozen snowflakes he went on his stealthy way, the very personification of man, the hunter.

About six hundred yards away Sergeant Telling also blessed the flurry of snow as he worked industriously at the repairs to the observation post. The task was easy: merely the replacement of a few rocks round the little steel cupola. Another ten minutes should see him on his way back. The darkness of the snowstorm was lifting as the daylight increased. Anyone could have done this bloody job. But Herr Dobermann had to establish his authority. Weber hadn't much longer to go by the look of him – emptying his guts every other minute – a walking bloody ghost – if he goes, who's next for Company Sergeant-Major? Telling scattered handfuls of snow over the replaced stones. It's Hellmut Telling, that's who. And he knows it. Probably hopes he'll get it out here, then he can put in that arse-creeping Krause. Removing his peaked cap, Telling mopped his head. That corner doesn't look right. A blind baby could spot that bit. He shifted the heavy rock, grunting with the effort, not noticing the sudden quick brightening of the gloom, the dangerous slackening of the shower.

The brightness spread quickly up the white face of the mountain rising before the searching eyes of Corporal Bryson. His rifle, swathed in white bandages, was thrust ready along the snow; he peered through the mask-holes in the handkerchief hiding his face, but saw nothing. Only the glaring expanse climbing into the wispy veils of snow still sweeping across the summit of Monte Colle.

Like smoke blown from a chimney by gusting wind, the white curtain was parted and his skilled eyes picked up the little dark movement high up on the mountain. In an instant the sniper's brain worked out ranges, light, wind. The German came alive and amazingly close, balanced on the pointer of the telescopic

sight. He was crouching close against a large rock waiting for the coming of the next shower. Corporal Bryson snuggled the butt against his cheek, steadied his breathing, and began to squeeze the cold trigger. Don't let me miss, prayed Corporal Bryson of his God.

Let's have some more blasted snow, demanded Sergeant Telling of his. The rising sun blazed straight in his eye, striking jewelled fire from the snow. Then the sun exploded into a thousand furnace fragments and the mountains spun wildly, flying across the dawn heavens as the bullet went whining on its way, having driven a splinter of rock deep through Telling's remaining eye.

He lay in darkness, huddled at the base of the big rock. Now and then he moaned softly to himself; he could not move, but he could feel the coldness of the snow against his mouth and the kiss of the wind bringing the forerunner of the next shower.

'All the lads up there, they'll say, what the hell kept you, Telling,' whispered a voice that must have been his. Laughing soundlessly with bared teeth, he died.

Slowly, very slowly, Corporal Bryson reloaded. He too smiled, for he was happy.

And so died Sergeant Telling, the only casualty reported on either side on the entire Italian Front during the whole of that day.

Following so close upon the death of Private Kalbach that of their well-liked and respected Sergeant produced a steep drop in morale. If Captain Ziegler had still been at the helm the situation might have burnt itself out after a burst of grumbling and formless anger. But with Lieutenant Dobermann in command the bitter feeling quickly rose to flashpoint, especially among the men of Telling's platoon.

'There'll soon be no Germans left,' said Private Maulhard, picking a louse from the seam of his shirt and dropping it into the tin-lid held above a stump of candle. 'That makes twenty-six,' he gloated with cruel triumph.

'What the enemy misses we kill off ourselves,' said Sergeant Hufnagel, now commanding the platoon. 'By sheer bloody stupidity.' He lay on his packing-case bunk with his arms under his head, staring at the cracks in the concrete roof of the bunker. On the bunk below Kumitsch was stretched out, seemingly asleep. The others sat round the table in a pungent aura of smoke, dirty clothes and the thick sweet smell of stale sleep.

'In the Great War Germany lost about six million men. Or that's what my father said.' Maulhard watched the death throes of a sizzling louse with considerable interest.

'The Great War! What the hell will they call this one then?' Corporal Wiederheim snorted contemptuously.

'Thirty!' exclaimed Maulhard. 'By God,' he squeaked belligerently. 'I can think of a few people I'd like to see frying in this tin.'

'Leave it alone, Pastor. That sort of stuff'll get you nowhere.' Hufnagel drew up one leg and scratched the sole of his foot. 'Now listen to me, all of you. Kalbach was a damned good number two on a light machine-gun. He's gone. Right then, none of your belly-aching's going to get him back. Right? Sergeant Telling was the best bloody platoon commander you're ever likely to see even if this war goes on for another fifty years, which it shows every sign of doing. Well, he's gone. The same applies. Right?'

'Right,' agreed Wiederheim. 'I've seen enough men go in these last rotten years to know that not one of them has been irreplaceable. Not a bloody one,' he repeated, suddenly stabbing the bayonet he was cleaning hard into the table. 'Work it off with a bloody good grouse and let's hear no more.'

'But that Dobermann,' muttered Runz mutinously. Immediately after Ziegler's death he had applied to leave Company Headquarters and go back to a platoon.

'Dobermann's an unmitigated swine,' said Hufnagel quietly. 'But he's in command of the Company. Right? This is a damned good company and a bloody good platoon. See it stays that way.'

'There are plenty of men who'd plant a grenade in Herr Dobermann's guts without wanting a thankyou,' said Corporal Wiederheim. His pipe billowed disgustingly. Kumitsch's mouth tightened but he did not speak or open his eyes.

'Why doesn't the C.O. throw him out?' asked Damme, speaking for the first time.

'And who does he put in his place, Master-mind? Officers don't drop off the trees any more.'

'I heard Corporal Jung saying the boss was tearing mad,' said Runz. 'He and Grandpa Holmers were talking most of the night and drinking anything they could lay their hands on.'

'Why couldn't he do anything for Kalbach? He's a Colonel, isn't he? He's got all those crosses and everything. He could have stopped it. Ah, thirty-three.' Maulhard stirred the charred corpses with a stick.

'There are such things as generals,' growled Wiederheim. 'And Supreme Commanders, and Himmler's little boys. Don't look as if a bloody scorpion had got into your pants; there isn't any of that Party filth snooping about here. The Pastor hasn't got a bloody microphone jammed up his backside.' He tried another match on his pipe. 'Our little Colonel did all he could for Kalbach, you can be sure of that. I'm no officer-lover, but – I'd put him in the same bracket as Ziegler.' And, to the men of Number One Company, that was praise indeed.

'Half the time he looks as if he doesn't want to command any-

thing,' put in Damme. 'That's the funny part.'

'But he couldn't be anything except a soldier,' pointed out Runz. 'You can't see him in a civvy suit, can you?'

'That's where he's going to be when this lot's over,' said Hufnagel.

'He's not made for peace,' said Runz firmly.

'Are any of us?' asked Corporal Wiederheim. They thought about this for a while. Damme shoved some more bits of wood into the stove. Maulhard searched desperately for the fiftieth victim.

'Perhaps he won't want peace,' he piped.

'The officers got us into this bloody mess. They can damn well get us out,' said Wiederheim.

'We followed them, didn't we?' remarked Hufnagel. They bickered half-heartedly.

'It says in the papers that we can expect the appearance of the Führer's latest weapons in the very near future.' Damme was an avid reader of newspapers and always ready to give the latest report on anything from the total destruction of London to U-boat sinkings in the Atlantic.

'In the *Hour of the Nation* it said that a wave of pacifism is sweeping America and that Britain is suffering so badly from war-weariness that – '

'Secret weapons, Damme?'

'The only secret weapon I want to see used is this one,' Sergeant Hufnagel patted his trousers. But no one laughed much; gloom hung heavy in the smoky little shelter. 'While I've still got him in one piece.' He fell silent for a moment, thinking of the faithless Elfrida.

'Not like that poor sod Eibknecht. Left it floating down the Volturno. What a way to go home.' The unpleasantness of this latest idea kept them silent except for the horrid little frizzling of Maulhard's lice.

'They're certainly not giving up in Italy,' said Runz. Even though no longer at the fountainhead he had his finger very much on the pulse. 'The S.S. are taking over the Monte Vergate positions – '

'We've heard this before.'

'Think up something new, Runz.'

'Goering's coming to occupy Rommel Ridge.'

'No,' he protested. 'This time it's a fact. The advance party's in Vergate now. They're swaggering about the place as if no one else had ever let off a rifle.'

'That's where he should be,' said Kumitsch very loudly, jumping off his bunk. They gazed at him in open-mouthed surprise.

'That's the place for Herr Bloody Dobermann – with his pals in the S.S.' His face was taut with fury, his short reddish hair

gave his anger an added ferocity. 'How much longer are we going on taking orders from butchers and madmen? Where will it get us? Where the hell will all this bloodstained stupidity get us?' He paused for breath. Corporal Wiederheim opened his mouth to speak, but Hufnagel shook his head warningly. Let him get it off his chest. Spit out your hatred and start again, that was Hufnagel's way. He knew how the boy felt: his friend put up against a bloody wall for something he didn't do – let him talk.

'What do we wash our hands in?' asked Kumitsch, his voice trembling. 'Blood, that's what.'

'Don't talk such bloody balls, Heinrich,' exclaimed Damme. 'We're soldiers, not a crowd of knackers.'

'Leave him alone,' ordered Hufnagel.

'You think anyone'll ever shake us by the hand again when this is over? Tell me a country, just tell me one bloody country where a German will be welcome. Oh yes, put out the flags, the Germans are coming.' He spoke with all the bitterness of a middle-aged man.

'They'll forget,' said Maulhard, forgetting his lice. 'You see they'll forget. They'll have to. It's all financial,' he added nodding wisely.

'All I can say then it's going to take a damned great flood of money to drown the memory of what's been done by the Third Reich.' Kumitsch was almost crying with rage.

'He's right,' said Corporal Wiederheim. 'Why *do* we go on? Why has all this happened anyway? *Lebensraum*, they told us. The only bloody *Lebensraum* we're ever likely to get is six feet of someone else's earth. God knows I've killed my share; I've killed them as easy as the Pastor's roasting those blasted lice of his. Killing doesn't worry me, not one bit, no more than it worries the Sergeant here.' Hufnagel nodded in agreement.

'It's my job. It's what they pay me for. Ask any bloody front-line man, Ivan or Tommy or Pole, it doesn't matter, and they'll tell you the same. If we have to then we'll carry on killing, but why – ' He shook his head in a puzzled way. 'But why – that's a different matter.'

'Because we're a crowd of bloody sheep, that's why,' stormed Kumitsch. 'Like our fathers were and – '

'Hey,' cried Damme indignantly, 'are you a Communist?'

'Of course I'm not. But you don't have to be a Communist to see that we've been led to disaster by – '

'Who said anything about disaster?' Damme's temper was rising.

'Well, you damned fool, you don't think we're going to come out of this shambles on top, do you?'

'Making a speech, Kumitsch?' enquired Lieutenant Doberm-mann icily from the entrance. There was a moment of utter dismay in the bunker as they all tried to take in the fact of his

sudden unwelcome appearance. Then they slowly stood up.

'What's going on, Sergeant?' Dobermann had to stoop slightly in the bunker.

'We were just having a chat, Herr Leutnant.' Dobermann glared round suspiciously. He had only caught the last few words, as the wind outside was strong and the hail-shower against his helmet had been deafening.

'Stand to attention, Kumitsch,' he snarled. Heinrich Kumitsch did not move.

'You heard the officer,' said Wiederheim warningly.

'Are you deaf, or what? Stand to attention when I speak to you.' Dobermann thrust his furious young face down to within a few inches of Kumitsch's blazing eyes. But still the soldier did not move.

'I'll give you one more chance,' said the officer in a tone of barely controlled rage. 'Stand to attention!' He roared the command and, against his will, Kumitsch's boots came slowly together, but the expression on his face did not alter.

'Pull yourself together, man, for God's sake,' said Sergeant Hufnagel. 'D'you want to wind up like Private Kalbach?'

'Silence,' shouted Dobermann. 'I'll handle this.'

Hufnagel's tired eyes narrowed.

'Now,' the Lieutenant said to Kumitsch in a quieter voice. 'What's the meaning of this? What are you playing at, eh?'

'I'm not "playing" at anything,' answered Kumitsch with cold insolence all over his face. Maulhard drew in his breath sharply.

'So,' said Dobermann. 'You're after a court-martial. Is that it? Well, come on, speak up. Answer me.' Kumitsch stared at a spot in the middle of Dobermann's broad chest. The bunker held its breath in sullen, brooding silence, the men standing watchful and menacing, staring at their company commander with frank dislike. Corporal Wiederheim's hand rested on the bayonet sticking in the table. Officers had died in such circumstances before, with a bullet in the head or a bayonet in the back. The bunker was isolated, the wind sufficient to muffle the sounds of any struggle. His hand went to his pistol holster. Whatever his other failings Lieutenant Dobermann was certainly no coward.

'Get the Company Sergeant-Major,' he ordered. 'At once!' Sergeant Hufnagel twirled the handle of the field telephone. Dobermann placed himself with his back to a wall, crouching slightly like an enormous cat.

While they waited for the arrival of Sergeant-Major Weber no one spoke except for Hufnagel, who said peaceably:

'If the Herr Leutnant will listen, I can explain – '

'Don't waste your breath,' snapped Dobermann, his eyes roving from man to man, returning to Kumitsch. 'There is no explanation to cover insubordination. I'd have thought an experienced soldier like you would have been aware of this fact.' I'll

show these swine who's boss, he thought. I'll cut out the rot before it has time to spread. He regarded their dirty, unshaven faces and crumpled, stained uniforms with revulsion. God help their country if it was depending on such creatures as these.

On the arrival of the Sergeant-Major, Private Kumitsch was put under close arrest and Private Maulhard detailed as escort. The latter was slow in putting on his belt and helmet.

'Come on, come on.' Lieutenant Dobermann was fed up with this bunch. 'Hurry it up or you'll join him.'

Kumitsch stood expressionless; Company Sergeant-Major Weber mastered the spasm of his bowels with a sweating contortion of his features.

'Get a bloody move on, Maulhard,' growled Sergeant Hufnagel. 'You're still a soldier, you know. When this famous war's over you can do what you bloody well like – open a brothel, spout from a bloody pulpit for all I care, but now at this moment you'll damned well *get moving*!' He shouted the last words angrily, for he was thoroughly upset by the whole stupid performance.

'Take him down to Battalion Headquarters,' said Dobermann and stalked from the bunker.

'I'm disappointed in you, Hufnagel,' said Weber, shaking his head sadly. 'A bunch of schoolboys and you let them get out of control. I don't know, I really don't. This isn't the old Wehrmacht any longer. Christ, my bloody stomach!' Groaning, he too left the troublesome bunker.

After the arrest of Private Kumitsch events moved rapidly.

'Let's get it over,' said Colonel von List in a resigned voice. First of all Lieutenant Dobermann came in. Von List had a few words with him, then ordered Captain Stempfe to get things moving.

Private Kumitsch was marched in by Sergeant-Major Tomas with a great clatter and commotion; the formalities were gone through; the charge read out very precisely by Captain Stempfe; Kumitsch was told to look to his front and keep his hands still, then there was a moment's silence.

'Have you anything to say, Kumitsch?' Von List sat with his fingers pressed together in a pyramid.

'No, Herr Oberst, nothing.'

'I see. Lieutenant Dobermann.'

Dobermann told his story with a wooden expression on his face.

'I consider this man was guilty of a gross breach of discipline, sir,' he finished, resuming his imitation of a large, blond statue.

'Sergeant Hufnagel.'

Hufnagel leapt forward with a tremendous stamping of boots. In the unaccustomed formality of the occasion he forgot himself

so far as to salute in the Wehrmacht manner.

'Salute properly, Sergeant,' snapped Stempfe.

'Never mind about that,' said von List curtly. 'Get on with it, Hufnagel.'

'Yes, Herr Oberst. At sixteen forty hours on the – '

'We know all that. I merely want to know whether you've ever had trouble of any sort from this man before?'

'No, sir, never. He's a bloody good – begging the Herr Oberst's pardon – '

'Do hurry up, Hufnagel, I'm not someone's spinster aunt.'

'No, Herr Oberst.' He reeled off his prepared piece on Private Kumitsch. 'One of the best soldiers in the platoon, sir.' He too leapt back against the wall. Then, before anyone could stop him, he leapt forward again.

'Have I the Herr Oberst's permission to speak?'

Von List nodded.

'Private Kumitsch has been very upset by the death of Private Kalbach. That's all, sir.'

Von List thought swiftly. He had discussed the matter with Holmers earlier and agreed this explosive business must be handled with the utmost care. He glanced at the pad before him. Morale low. Feeling in Number One Company. Dobermann? He added another question mark. Sergeant Blaun to be transferred? He scratched out this query sign. Looking up he said: 'There are cases like yours, Kumitsch, that wind up before a firing-squad.' He paused. 'Is that where you want to end up, you damned young fool?' Not waiting for an answer he went on: 'What the hell d'you think you're doing?' Von List brought his fist down on the table with a crash. 'You're in uniform. You're under military law and, while you're in my battalion you'll bloody well do what your superior officers tell you. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Herr Oberst.' Kumitsch was pale. Though the Colonel had not raised his voice particularly loud every word had gone home like splinters of steel.

'I could have you sent to a punishment battalion. Bury the dead under fire; lift mines; dig trenches and put up wire. Sleep under the groundsheets which have carried the dead and eat pigs' swill. A punishment battalion on the Russian front, Kumitsch. That's where you'll go if I have any more of this nonsense. Pull yourself together and don't let me see you in here again wasting everyone's time. And now, in case you think you're getting off scot-free I have a surprise for you. You'll be on the ration detail for the next fourteen nights.' This was a fatigue both feared and loathed by the front-line soldiers, entailing as it did loss of sleep and exposure to shell and mortar fire on the tracks leading up the mountain. 'If you're in trouble again then you'll be court-martialled. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Herr Oberst.'

'Get him out of here, Sergeant-Major. Lieutenant Dobermann, a moment, please.'

When the others had stamped out, von List came to the point at once.

'What is the effective strength of your company, Lieutenant?'

'Seventy-six, Herr Oberst. No, seventy-five. A man went sick with boils this morning.'

'Very well, I want you to disband Telling's platoon and spread the men among the other two platoons.' Dobermann looked as if he was going to protest, but von List gave him no chance.

'As well as this I am going to put Sergeant Blaun in command of the Defence Platoon in place of Weismuller. I suggest you replace him with Wiederheim. What are your views on these changes?' Lieutenant Dobermann sought for words in his rather limited vocabulary.

'Good. I'm glad you agree with me that these alterations are essential under the circumstances.' Von List picked up his paper-knife and balanced it carefully on his finger.

'Your keenness and your courage are much appreciated,' he said with the first smile of the interview. 'But I'd like you to keep in mind what I said a moment ago. Go easy with these men, Lieutenant. This is not the moment for heavy-handedness. This is not 1940. There are times when the blind eye is considerably more effective than the big stick. The men in your company have been badly shaken by the events of the past week and they'll need careful nursing to restore them to what they were. But I'm sure you realise that.' The smile was warm. 'And now, you'll have a lot to do with all this reorganisation. Oh, one last word.'

'Herr Oberst?'

'Should you have any more problems I shall always be here, you know.'

'Yes, sir.'

'On your way out you might tell the Sergeant-Major I'll be needing Corporal Jung in an hour. But Halser can take the afternoon off.' The door banged behind Lieutenant Dobermann.

'Exit a problem rapidly growing into a permanent headache,' said Major Holmers. 'But the fellow's damnably efficient. That's the devil of it.'

'They're beginning to think for themselves,' said von List, gazing into space with faraway eyes. 'Soon we'll have our own men to contend with as well as the enemy. And then we really will be earning our keep.' He let the knife slip from his finger and on to the table with a crash that made Stempfe jump in his chair.

'I know you'd like to hang the lot, Stempfe,' observed von List getting up. 'But savage punishments aren't the answer. If we want to keep them going for this long last lap then we lead, we don't drive.' He put on his coat and cap. 'Whoever begins to think ceases to be a Nazi. Isn't that it, gentlemen?' The usual

expression of disapproval spread over the Adjutant's long face.

'Look after things, Holmers,' said von List cheerfully. 'I'm off to pay a social call on our new S.S. neighbours.'

4

As Siegfried Rottendorp had so rightly pointed out, the formations of the Waffen S.S. considered themselves the *élite* of the crumbling yet still dangerous German armies. Men like S.S. Standartenführer Leuger no more thought of defeat than he would have thought of extending mercy. This gentleman was still offensively minded; he wanted to spin out the killing as long as possible for, somewhere in his shrivelled heart, he knew it would not continue forever. So he and his Divisional Commander, Brigadeführer Lepke, had come to Italy with the firm intention of upholding the reputation won by the Twentieth S.S. Division for both fighting and ruthlessness (in Russia and the Balkans) by every means available to them.

'There are believed to be over fifty thousand of these savages in Northern Italy alone,' he said to his guest, and noted with contempt the expression of distaste that registered on von List's face. Weak in the stomach. Leuger too wore the Knight's Cross, though without the Diamonds; but, on the other hand, his wound badge was in gold, for his body was as scarred as his mind.

'Can you think of a better answer?' he asked, gesturing towards the five Italians.

'I should have thought it would have only made the others want revenge even more,' said von List coldly. It was no use talking to such men; he had tried before. The wind was bitter, scouring the hard snow and striking his face like white flame; a ghostly sun hung low in the frosty mist and the pennant of Leuger's battalion stood out stiffly – a black panther's head on a blood-red background.

The Italians were behind von List: three men and two women who had been made to stand in the icy afternoon wind while the charges against them were read out by Leuger's adjutant, a tall man with the face of a young Nordic god. But they no longer felt the cold, for they hung from the gallows they themselves had erected and their starting eyes were already glazed with a film of ice.

'*Pour encourager les autres*,' said the Standartenführer. He prided himself on his culture.

'There was no proof these people had anything to do with the

partisans,' said von List.

'Proof. Proof. Everyone always gabbling about proof. Do we have to wait till the knife's between our shoulders till we take any action?' He had the eyes of a vulture. 'No, Colonel, that's the trouble with many of you Wehrmacht types, you're altogether too soft.' Too soft! Von List hunched himself deeper into his Russian coat. Too soft! Once again he had stood by and watched murder done and taken no action just because the murderers were in German uniform. How many times had he been sickened and done nothing? How many more 'executions' would he watch in silence?

'Germany would be in a better state if we hadn't used kid gloves – '

'Kid gloves?' This time von List was stung to speech. 'Is it kid gloves that they use in Auschwitz and Ravensbruck?'

'I know nothing about that.' The man's mouth was no more than a surgical scar across his rather flat face. 'And I fail to see what it has to do with us. Our job is to defeat the enemy – whether over there' – he nodded towards the grey south – 'or within our own ranks,' he said unpleasantly.

'Shall I have them cut down?' asked the adjutant. He might have been a shop assistant asking, shall I have the window display changed?

'Not yet,' said Leuger. 'I want those creatures to take a good look.' The villagers of Vergate stood shivering in two short lines facing the gallows. Most of them stared at their feet, except for one young man who gazed, absolutely mesmerised by the hanging bodies; his lips moved stiffly and soundlessly in his white, frozen face.

'It's having an effect on one of the swine,' remarked the adjutant.

'I want them to know that we will stand no nonsense,' said the Standartenführer. 'The word will soon get round that Monte Vergate is now held by troops who play quite a different game. The rules are really very simple: for every German soldier molested, five hangings; every large-scale attack on transport or positions in this division, one village destroyed. Do you consider that fair, Colonel?' He laughed, showing the small, even teeth of a woman.

Von List had heard that laugh before. The S.S. Captain astride a dead child beside the great bloodstained hole in the chalky earth beyond the Don, among the sage and wild thyme where once Batu the Mongol had pitched his golden tent, with a smoking pistol in his hand and shreds of brain on his jackboots – he had laughed. The Death's Head Colonel waiting to go forward into Poland, he had laughed at the thought of the sport that lay ahead. The commander of the *Einsatzkommando* – one of the feared and hated extermination units, he also laughed, tinged with a sort of

wild madness, as he returned from a huge and successful orgy of murder.

The laughter rang horribly in von List's mind so that he almost put up his hands to his head.

'. . . they'll soon find out we mean business on this sector . . .' Leuger was speaking but von List hardly heard his words. Was this terrible laughter purely German? Was it only his countrymen who had this awful sense of humour? Or did war breed such laughter among all men – at such jokes?

'We intend to hit the enemy often and hard,' said Leuger, striking the palm of his hand with his fist. 'They'll soon know what it is to face the Waffen S.S.' These were the men of whom Siegfried had spoken with such fulsome praise. A few of them were moving about between the buildings of Vergate; they were smart and held themselves well, walking with the proud swagger befitting the master examples of a Master Race. Young boys mostly, no older than the children of his own battalion, but with a look to them which stamped them as men already very wise in the ways of killing. Few gave more than a bored glance at the dead slowly twirling against the sky.

'While Germany has such men there can be no thought of defeat.' Leuger's vulture eyes burned for an instant.

'We know that weapons are being prepared which will bring the enemy to their knees,' rapped out the adjutant, speaking like a poster come to life.

'Yes,' said von List. 'Let us only hope they appear before too long.' A junior officer came hurrying towards them flapping a piece of paper.

'A message from the Brigadeführer,' he cried. 'You're required at Divisional Headquarters at once, Standartenführer.' Up went his arm like a railway signal.

'You'll excuse me, Colonel.' Leuger prided himself on his good manners. 'If you care, please come in and have some refreshment. Falcke here will entertain you until I get back. We have some quite drinkable coffee.'

'Thank you, but I must get back,' said von List very politely. The S.S. officers marched away, erect and entirely undefeated. Against his will von List turned slowly to face the Italians. They stared back with their blackening faces and lolling heads; one of the girls twisted slightly at the end of her rope, her skirt flapping against her bare, mottled legs. Half an hour ago you were very pretty. Where did you spend your last night? In the arms of this one? Or this one? Or him, the one who'd shouted defiance until the breath was cut off by the jerking cord? The men were all barefoot and two of them naked to the waist, for shoes and clothes in good repair were hard to come by these days. The living Italians watched him with dark hatred smouldering in their eyes.

'*Andiamo! Via!* Go.' He shouted, gesturing at them to go to their houses. They shuffled off in a little group, packed close like sheep in a strange field. Only the young man remained.

'And you! Go on!' The Italian spat on the trampled snow before following the others. At least I've saved them standing in the cold, von List thought bitterly. At least I've done something.

'Home,' he said curtly to Corporal Jung in the car. Jung was silent as they drove back along the narrow winding road hidden from the enemy by the mountains of Vergate and Colle. It was best to hold your tongue when he was like this. The ice crunched sharply in the ruts. Half way back von List told him to stop.

'Wait here. I'll be back in a moment.'

Corporal Jung watched him climb slowly up the hillside, picking his way among the boulders and scrub-oak. Mad, said Jung aloud. Raving. Still, that's his look-out. Perhaps he only wants to let down his trousers, thought Jung delicately. Even colonels have to after all. Ah well, he'd be back in his own time. Probably wanted to get some clean air into his lungs after the stringing-up. Why go and kill good-looking girls like that? Still, that's the trouble about war, people have to get killed, even pretty girls.

Now what's he up to? He saw von List standing on the top of the hill. He's all right, he can look after himself if anyone can. Jung lit the crumpled remains of a cigarette. Who'd be a bloody colonel? Always things on your mind. He watched the small figure. Never do to go and lose him on the way home. He'd have watchdog Halser on his neck – yes, that's the devil of a war, so many bloody people have to cop it. Corporal Jung cupped his cold hands round the minute glow of the burning tobacco.

Von List stood sunk in thought. The sun had broken through and the mountains were at their most spectacular, glittering with frost. Even the occasional fountains of blackened snow tossed up by the random shells on Monte Colle had a certain savage beauty. How many more shells must fall to scorch and maim before a halt was called? How many more necks must be stretched? How many mass graves filled to the edge? How many more ovens fed with the living and the dead? What was he, a German officer, true to his oath, what was he doing thinking like this? So his troubled thoughts chased each other through his mind and got him precisely nowhere.

A self-propelled gun was firing from the ruins of a small *casa*, throwing up clouds of powdered snow; the shells screeched briefly as they vanished southwards. How simple. Cram a shell into the breech; fire, reload, fire again, until someone tells you to stop. Not thinking why. Not caring why. Discipline and ignorance. In many ways, how enviable the lot of the private soldier. The muzzle-flash stained the beauty of the scene. Then, before the British shells could arrive the S.P. started its engine in a puff of blue smoke and backed quickly out of the ruins and went

crawling away like some devilish beetle.

As he made his way down the slope the enemy shells were busily blowing the rubble to dust.

5

ALREADY there was a feel of spring in the air. The snow that fell was wet and the valleys were foul with chocolate slush; small birds called nervously in the deserted oak-woods, greeting a sun that increased in brilliance and warmth as the days passed. The Germans cursed this sun as continuously as their enemies blessed the clear blue skies which allowed the fighter-bombers to roam at will above the waking battlefield. These cruel machines were feared and hated as deeply as the ever-increasing flow of shells pounding the Monte Colle positions and the roads that fed them with a feeble trickle of ammunition and supplies. Quartermaster Sauer lost pounds of good flesh in his vain attempts to keep the battalion decently supplied with food, tobacco and boots: the indispensables of war.

The impudent aircraft circled the shining peaks and swooped with terrifying speed along the valleys, blasting single vehicles rash enough to move by day, and even single men with rockets and cannon-fire. Everywhere between Rocca San Michele and Bologna men drove or marched or served their guns with one eye lifted to the deadly sky.

'Where the hell's the bloody Luftwaffe?' yelled the exasperated and frightened Sergeant Hufnagel, shaking the screaming din of yet another attack on the mountain from his head.

'Helping to throw back the Russians,' squeaked Maulhard.

'Sweeping the skies of the Western Front,' said Damme.

'Carrying the Reichsmarshal's loot to South America,' put in Kumitsch cynically.

'Right, off the floor,' ordered Hufnagel. 'It's not scrubbing day.' They got up from the various undignified positions into which they had been forced by the vicious screech of the rockets.

'How much longer have we got to put up with this nonsense?' muttered Corporal Wiederheim.

'Till someone tells us to stop,' answered Hufnagel, spitting dust.

Many of the men were sullen and without spirit, utterly depressed by the sight of these aeroplanes flying unopposed by the monotony of their meagre diet; by the uncertainty of the mails from Germany and, even more, by what the letters so often contained. The appearance of their popular Commanding Officer,

encouraging, joking with them, though without the old glow of laughter in his eyes, put some of the heart back into the dazed and weary men. But one man could not overcome the wave of apathy and 'what-the-hell' creeping slowly through the ranks of the 68th Regiment. Not even such a man as Lieutenant-Colonel von List. For the field-grey soldiers were sick and tired.

'We've done all that could be expected of us,' they whispered secretly among themselves, their words of defeat lost in the roar of the enemy aircraft, as seeds are scattered by a great wind.

'If we had equal weapons,' said some, still defiant. But many more said, 'For God's sake, let's make an end to it and go home.'

'If we could get away,' thought others, 'we could hide ourselves with an Italian family till the war's over.' But they knew their families would hang, so they remained at their posts firing the machine-guns with all their old skill and using their few shells with all the old devastating accuracy and, beyond No Man's Land, their enemies, also sick and tired, knew there were many bitter miles to cover before they saw their homes again.

The smell of defeat hung heavy over the mountains, stalking like a grey ghost through the steel and concrete rabbit-warrens built to last forever.

'The latest casualty returns, sir,' said Captain Stempfe brightly.

'Just a moment, please. What were you saying, Holmers? About Number Three Company?'

'If you want to keep it going,' said Holmers patiently. 'Then the only way is to disband the defence platoon and send the eighteen men to Huth.' Von List sat staring at his hands, inspecting the nails as if they were of the greatest importance. He'd been like this for the last week, his mind far away, lost in some problem he never shared. Ever since the deaths of Captain Ziegler and Private Kalbach he had become increasingly prone to these sudden spells of withdrawal when he seemed quite unconscious of what went on around him.

'Very well then, we'd better do that,' he said without much interest. For von List had much on his mind that morning . . . 'We've just heard that the Russians have taken Königsberg. Darling, I am so terribly sorry. I know how you'll feel about this awful news. We can only pray that when the war is over, and God grant it may be soon, for I don't see how Germany can continue, the place you love so much may be free again . . . ' The words of her letter were engraved on his heart. By now Marienwald must be in Russian hands. Destruction. Burning. The lovely rooms befouled by the Siberian assault troops, the trees hacked down by shell-fire or for firewood. Thank God his father and mother were dead.

'What? I'm sorry.' He tried to concentrate on what Holmers was saying.

'Sergeant Blaun,' repeated Holmers more sharply. 'What about him?'

'He can't go back to Dobermann, that's quite certain. Not after that business of Telling. Better leave him where he is.'

'But the Defence Platoon's being split up.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

That house had been the home of the von Lists for two hundred years. And now the flat-faced soldiers would rip down the golden curtains for bedding and flatten the ornamental hedges with their tanks; they would –

'Excuse me, sir, but are you all right?'

'Yes, Holmers. Yes, I'm fine. Now, about Blaun. I tell you what, we'll keep one section of the Platoon, after all we don't want to be murdered in our beds, do we, Stempfe?' He forced a certain spurious gaiety into his voice.

Captain Stempfe glanced across from his study of the casualty returns and smiled suspiciously.

'Surely it is only the old or the wicked who die in their beds,' he said with his oily little giggle. Von List averted his gaze in silence. Stempfe being skittish or facetious was more than he could bear at that moment.

'These returns, sir – '

'Let's have a look. It's not much of a command for the excellend Blaun, but he's earned a rest. Yes, we'll leave him in his present job. I'll have a word with him myself this morning.'

'Very well, sir.'

By filling his mind with the pressing problems of his command he could perhaps keep the thoughts of his home at bay, at least until he was alone. More and more these days he dreaded being alone. He threw himself into the study of the figures on the paper before him. Major Holmers drew up the orders for the official disbandment of the Defence Platoon, and the Adjutant called for the officers' morning coffee. In the distance aeroplanes were diving, splitting the sky with a sound to turn men's innards to water.

'I want to see Buchner,' said von List suddenly.

Medical Officer Buchner looked his imperturbable self; thinner perhaps and with an even more cynical twist to his lips, but quite unworried. If hell had opened beneath his very feet, Buchner would have dropped through without batting an eyelid.

'These casualty figures,' said von List at once. 'The proportion of sick to wounded is about three to one. How d'you account for this?'

Buchner shrugged. 'A spreading psychosis,' he said. 'A growing distaste for being shot at.'

'Mass hysteria,' said Stempfe with great assurance. 'That's all it is.'

'Boils,' read von List. 'Severe headache. Inability to sleep.

Stomach pains. Continual vomiting. Diarrhoea.' He got up and began pacing the room.

'Between the vomiting and the stomach pains, they can still fire a rifle, can't they, Herr Doktor?'

'Some of them, yes.'

'You're not keeping them, are you? You're not filling all the beds with boils and headaches, I presume?'

'I've been dealing with front-line soldiers for the last five years, sir,' said Buchner impassively. 'Don't worry, I give them a couple of little coloured pills, pat them on the back and send them up the hill. But for each man I send back to the line another takes his place. I'll soon be running out of pills.'

'Then you'd better give them something out of a glass, and make it as nasty as possible.'

'At this stage of the proceedings,' said Buchner, stroking his chin slowly, 'an increasing number of Germany's heroes naturally want to return home with as few holes in their hides as possible.'

'Very understandable,' said von List. 'But unfortunately, that is not what we're paid for.' He stopped opposite the doctor.

'Understand this, Herr Doktor. Within a very short time we're going to need every man we can find – and every one of your beds. So I don't want to find them crammed with men suffering from headaches. I want every man who can hold a weapon on this bloody mountain of ours. Answer it, Stempfe.' The Adjutant picked up the receiver.

'At Stalingrad men with only one arm fought. They lay behind their guns without feet and fought. If they could do it, then so can we. Ulcers, boils, fevers, cramps! If they can walk and have the use of their trigger fingers then they go into the line. Is that clear, Buchner?'

'Quite, sir.' Buchner was smiling.

'For you, Herr Oberst. Colonel Freiburg.' Captain Stempfe regarded his Commanding Officer with surprise mingled with a sort of stupefied admiration. You could never tell with him. Some of his remarks were often dangerously close to defeatism and yet, suddenly he'd up and make a speech like that. Remarkable. The Adjutant sat wondering to himself.

'I have to go to Regimental Headquarters at once.' Von List put on his cap. 'I'll need my maps, Stempfe.'

'Is this a good moment for driving?' Major Holmers stood by the window, the buckle of his belt gleaming in the sunlight.

'No. But when the devil's at the wheel – ' von List laughed. 'Corporal Halser will watch through the back window. We'll get there.'

'Couldn't he have waited until evening?' Holmers muttered mutinously.

'It's the General,' said von List. 'Wants to see all battalion commanders of the Regiment.'

'Some of them don't need a pep talk, that's certain,' said Medical Officer Buchner with dry amusement.

And everyone laughed except for Major Holmers who continued to stare out at the bright morning with a very worried look on his face.

But they reached San Silvestro safely, for the fighter-bombers were engaged further to the west and the road to Regimental Headquarters was free of danger except for the occasional big shells, one of which lifted the little car off all four wheels and dented the battered bonnet with a large chunk of rock.

'This is in no sense an order group, gentlemen,' General Fritschauer assured the officers assembled in Colonel Clausitz's operations room. The latter sat at his desk, very conscious of his position as host to this distinguished gathering, beaming round with his toothpaste smile. If a bomb hits this room, von List thought, the division'll be in some confusion. The other two battalion commanders: Reimann with his monocle and sabre scars, the very picture of a Prussian officer; Captain Bauer, representing the absent Major Stutz, in hospital with dysentery. Major Kramer sat stiff and lopsided in his chair; he had left most of his right shoulder outside Dunkirk. A dedicated professional artilleryman, he handled the Divisional guns with a flash that von List had seen equalled only by the Russians.

The General's eyes travelled slowly round the room; when they reached von List, he smiled slightly. They had not met since the execution of Private Kalbach.

'I have asked you here today,' he went on, 'so that we can discuss the present situation as it affects the Forty-Ninth Division.' He took the pointer handed to him by Captain Schiffers and turned to the large map covering the whole of one wall.

'Now, gentlemen, as I see it . . . ' His appreciation was short and all too clear.

In the west the attack had already begun: limited withdrawals by the 232nd and 114th Divisions in face of heavy American pressure – the enemy arrows thrusting like daggers for Modena and Reggio. To the east the first blows at Forli – to come at Bologna from the flank, along the great highway running straight all the way from the sea. Everywhere these limited withdrawals. How well he remembered the phrase from Russia. 'In face of superior forces' . . . 'Regrouping.'

'And in the centre they leave us alone,' he said, while the General paused to blow his nose.

'As Colonel von List so rightly says, they leave us alone,' said Clausitz. 'And why, gentlemen? I ask you, why? I'll tell you,' he continued, glancing round aggressively. 'They know they'll get nowhere against the Monte Colle defences.' His pale eyes gleamed at the thought of the glory that might be coming his way.

'With due respect,' said von List calmly. 'Once a crab has closed his claws round his prey his mouth has no difficulty in swallowing the victim. That is clumsily put, I agree. But it would seem to me that if the units on our flanks go then our defences become not a fortress but a trap.'

'Monte Colle is strong enough to stand alone for as long as required,' said Clausitz, hitting his table with the small silver-topped cane he carried when on parade.

'A hedgehog, Colonel?'

'If that's how you like to put it, yes.'

'I sometimes wonder what, if anything, was achieved by the hedgehog policy in Russia,' countered von List quietly, almost dreamily. 'Except the death or capture of thousands of men we could very well use at the moment.'

'When we've fired all our shells, and that won't take us long, I can tell you,' put in Major Kramer morosely, 'we can of course become prehistoric and throw rocks.' He was a gloomy man who very rarely smiled, having gradually lost his good humour on a score of blood-soaked battlefields.

General Fritschauer listened to all this in silence for a while, then took charge of the proceedings with his sharp, high voice. 'On our immediate flanks we have 44th Jäger, and elements of the 98th and 100th Mountain Divisions. These are reliable formations which will give a good account of themselves.' Colonel Clausitz nodded vigorously.

'While they hold, then our flanks are secure,' said the General plucking idly at his empty sleeve. 'Unfortunately the S.S. have been withdrawn to Germany. I say unfortunately, for, whatever any of us may think of them and their methods, they are damned fine soldiers when it comes to a situation such as this.' He paused, looking from one to the other as if wondering whether to utter the words in his mind.

'You are all soldiers of sufficient experience and good sense to realise that the situation is far from rosy. But, and I must emphasise, gentlemen, with all the force at my command, it is not hopeless.' Here Colonel Clausitz nodded again. Von List expected him to say 'Hear, hear!'

'We are officers of the Wehrmacht and, as such, we must remain loyal to our oath – '

'By God, yes,' cried Clausitz. General Fritschauer glanced at the enthusiastic colonel from his hooded eyes.

'Until such time as the Supreme Commander, our Führer, sees fit to call a halt to this' – he hesitated – 'this sad affair.' "I swear by God absolute obedience to the Führer of the Empire and of the German people . . . " The words hung heavily in von List's mind. "Adolf Hitler, Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht. And I will always be ready, as a valiant soldier, to risk my life in order to keep this oath . . . "

'This is the Order of the Day that I intend to issue,' the General held the paper close to his eyes in silence.

The General was reading, 'Soldiers of Germany! The supreme hour is about to strike when the enemy will launch what he thinks is the last attack. Should he succeed in breaking through the mountains then the way across the plains is open; the way to Germany is open. Your country looks to you, soldiers of the Forty-Ninth Division, not only to hold but to throw back this attack. As you have done so often before, you can show the world how the German soldier fights. I expect you to uphold the traditions of the Wehrmacht. I expect you to make the enemy pay a fearful price for every yard he may at first gain. I expect you all, officers, N.C.O.s, and men, to honour the memory of your fallen comrades of both these Great Wars by fighting and, if necessary, dying, where you stand.' His voice, at first flat and emotionless, now rang out strongly. His parchment skin showed a higher colour. He might almost believe what he was reading, thought von List. My God, perhaps he does.

'So let us take as our battle-cry the immortal boast of the Frenchmen at Verdun,' here the voice rose in pitch, 'They shall not pass! As your commander for over two years I thank you for what you have done and I thank you for what you are about to do. God go with you all. Signed, Fritschauer, General of Infantry.'

There was quite a long silence. He stood, sunk in thought, his fingers working away at the stump of his arm.

'Splendid, General,' exclaimed Clausitz. 'Quite splendid!'

'It is not splendid, Colonel. It is merely the sort of thing expected of a German general at this grave moment. That I should really mean what I said in the last two sentences is my own misfortune.' His voice had resumed its flat, empty note.

'The men of this division are capable of making the name of Monte Colle go down in history as an equal to Cassino, Stalingrad and Verdun. Provided . . . ' – the hooded eyes widened a fraction. 'Provided,' he repeated, 'there is the same magnificent standard of leadership.'

The officers looked quickly at each other, then back at their general.

'And of that aspect I have no doubts whatsoever,' he said more energetically. They watched him draw on his single leather glove with his teeth.

'Until you receive orders to the contrary from me personally or, should I be wounded or dead, from my deputy, the Monte Colle positions will be held.'

'To the last man, sir?'

'Yes, Colonel von List, to the last man.'

It was Clausitz who broke the electric silence.

'You can rely on the men of the 68th Regiment, General.'

'May God go with all of you, gentlemen,' said the General in

answer, and left the room, followed by Colonel Clausitz.

'Well,' chuckled Lieutenant-Colonel Reimann, slapping his hand with his gloves. 'We certainly know where we stand now. I must get back to break the good news to my battalion. Coming, Bauer? We'd better make use of this shower. I don't want one of those damned aeroplanes sitting on my tail. What about you, von List?'

'My driver knows a nice, out-of-the-way route. I'll be going back later. Anyway, a vehicle on its own attracts less attention.'

'Please yourself. See you in the last ditch.' Reimann's pleasant face opened in another of his good-natured chuckles.

'Bridges gone, roads blocked. If a bloody hen shows its beak they give it half a dozen rockets. I don't know,' complained Major Kramer gloomily, struggling into his leather greatcoat. 'I don't know. How the hell do they expect me to keep my guns supplied? It's enough to make a man throw up his hands. I don't know.'

The rain was coming down heavily when von List got outside, splashing from the puddles and pouring from the tiled roofs.

'Karl!'

General Fritschauer stood near his car, no longer the large and roomy machine of previous days, but a small, drab beetle of a thing from which the driver was removing the camouflage net.

'Not just yet, Sergeant.' The man replaced the sopping net and retired into shelter.

'I wanted to see you, Karl. You don't mind the rain? Good! Then we'll take a little walk.' In silence the two officers walked towards the end of the village, towards the place where Private Kalbach had spent his last night. The rain was refreshing on their faces.

'You've heard the news from Prussia?' said the General.

'Yes. I got a letter from Ledi this morning.'

Their slow, measured steps took them beyond the village along a muddy path leading up a small, dripping hill.

Here and there the snow lay in stubborn patches pockmarked by the raindrops.

'As you know,' said the General, 'I loved Marienwald as if it was my own home.' He stopped in a little clearing among the scrub-oak. The rain had closed round them like a grey cage and drummed on the trees with dreary persistence.

'The Russians have got their revenge,' said his godson. 'The first of my ancestors to live there fought at Zorndorf.'

'Ah, yes,' murmured the General, hazy about that particular battle. His general's coat was stained with long streaks of wet; water dripped from his cap; mud clung to his boots in thick filth.

'This may be the last chance for us to talk together,' he said. 'Within the next few days the world as we have known it for the

last five years may – ' He jerked his head so that the drops were scattered in a sudden little spray. 'May ? The word is *will*.' For a moment he stopped as if even these soaking little trees hid an army of informers. 'You know that. I know that. Every private soldier in this division knows it. Not only in this division but in the whole of the German Army.' He turned quickly so as to face von List.

'We are beaten,' he said in a voice to match the dripping branches. 'We were beaten two years ago when we let an army disappear into Stalingrad.'

'Then why the Order of the Day, sir ?' Von List faced him squarely. 'Why does the German Army still go on fighting ?' From below them they heard the ugly sound of a tracked vehicle grinding slowly past.

'For the second time in my life we are beaten.' The General's words were dead. 'But, as we did in '18, we will fight until someone tells us to stop. That is the simple answer, Karl. All of us,' he added.

'Excuse me, sir, but have we the right to – '

'Right ? Right, my dear Karl, has nothing to do with us any more. Nor wrong either. From now on all we can cling to is one word: duty. That's all we have left.' The General's skin was like wet grey paper.

'Believing himself inspired by God to lead the German people up to the sun he has hurled them into the depths. We gave ourselves to that vulgar little charlatan, Karl, that would-be Frederick the Great, that – ' He stopped the bitter flow. 'But that was no one's fault but our own. He is still the leader of the German nation and Commander of the Armed Forces, and, as such, we must obey him. For without obedience there can be only one thing, and that is anarchy.' Drunken, rioting soldiers, ripping the badges of rank from his officer's uniform, spitting, believing themselves on his decorations in the gutter . . . The memories flashed through his mind as he stood silently in the rain. Never again. Never return to another defeated Germany. Never.

'By our behaviour in the field we can perhaps retrieve a little of the honour thrown away by the German nation during these last infamous years. We can show a disgusted world there is still something approaching nobility attached to the profession of arms.' The sharp bang of eighty-eights firing from just beyond the hill was muted by the rain.

'We're hamstrung by our blind obedience and discipline. As a nation that is both our strength, and our weakness, Karl.' He looked at his watch.

'I must go,' he said. 'I wanted you to know my true feelings. For the sake of my friendship with your father and mother – ' . . .

A wet, spring day at Marienwald. Her face shining with rain and tears: the moment she decided the *affaire* must end – and all for

the sake of the son who now faced him twenty years later.

'So many of us have known of the terrible things done by our countrymen; we have lived with the knowledge and done nothing. Now we must pay the price.'

'Do what you like, says God, but pay for it afterwards. Isn't that it?'

'What a bill,' said the General quietly. 'What a monstrous bill.' They began to walk back.

'As your godfather I'd like to say one more thing, Karl.' His face was set straight ahead as he limped along the path. 'Though orders are still sacred, and though I still hold the power of life or death over every soldier in this Division, there comes a time when' – another batch of shells split the drizzling sky above them – 'when every man – I say man, Karl – every man must turn inwards and consult the promptings of his own miserable conscience.' He stumbled slightly, off-balance with one arm.

'For only there will he find the answer.'

* * *

The British battalion commander broke off his discourse to look out of the window.

'Let's hope to God we get a day like this on the fourteenth,' he said with considerable feeling. Outside the rain filled the earthen yard lying between his orderly room and the Regimental Aid Post, turning it to the usual quagmire in a matter of minutes.

'If they see us coming the whole way, the Padre's going to be kept pretty busy.'

His company commanders made no comment. They were all far too experienced soldiers to feel anything but dispirited at the thought of the job facing them.

'As soon as Colle has been taken and consolidated then we go for Point 715 and Caprara. That's the general idea anyway. Once Caprara and Abelle are in our hands then the first phase of the operation is over.'

'I don't imagine they'll be able to hang on long after Colle and Vergate have gone.'

'No,' agreed the battalion commander without conviction. That's the sort of damn-fool thing people had been saying ever since Alamein.

'D'you think they'll fight?'

'Of course they'll fight,' snorted Major Lumsden. 'They always do.'

'Alan's right. They're high quality troops occupying extremely strong positions whose morale, as far as we know, is still distressingly high. I think we've got to face it, this is going to be a pretty bloody sort of party.'

The rain had slackened to a thin drizzle shot with rays of weak sunlight. As if to celebrate, the British guns took up their task

banging away with great vigour.

'A week of this, plus the aircraft, ought to shake them a bit,' said Major Lumsden more cheerfully.

'It's a nice change after Africa,' said another officer. 'How long is it since we've seen a German aeroplane?'

'I've forgotten what they look like.'

They discussed the changed pattern of the war for a while as the sun cleared away the last of the rain-clouds; then, as always, they returned to the looming threat of Monte Colle.

'They could turn it into a miniature Cassino,' said one.

'It's our job to see they don't,' said the battalion commander.

'What about the tanks?'

'They think they can get on to Point 721 and up the valley past Casaglia – after we've lifted the mines.'

'During these next few days the partisans are going to be carrying out attacks on various headquarters and ammunition dumps,' said the colonel after further tactical talk.

'I remember a crowd of them in Montepulciano,' Major Lumsden laughed. 'They shot a lot of pigeons in the square with their *feux de joie*.'

'Some of these have been trained by British officers and seem to be slightly more organised.'

'I suggest we post a double ration of sentries,' said Major Lumsden. 'They're just as likely to end up attacking us.'

'Why bash our heads against this damned mountain at all?' asked someone. 'The whole thing's folding up anyway. Most of Germany's overrun. The Russians are practically in Berlin – '

'This time there's to be no mistake,' interrupted the colonel. 'The German army is to be destroyed in the field and not allowed to march home with its colours flying. So let's get to Caprara and then perhaps at last we can go home.'

A salvo of shells arrived, flinging up rock and dirty snow from the hill behind La Quercia.

'They never give up, do they?'

In answer six fighters slammed low above the building heading north.

6

The spring thaw had done little to improve the roads leading to the front. Hanging grimly to the back of the Fiat with his large feet on the bumper, Corporal Halser cursed the jolting, soaking progress to Rocca San Michele. What bloody aeroplane would want to leave the ground in this? He felt his job of spotter to be

superfluous. Still, only another five minutes. He knew the road like the back of his large, red hand; they were entering the last straight bit before the village.

Karl von List hardly noticed the leaks in the roof. Since leaving San Silvestro he hadn't opened his mouth. The General's words chased themselves round his head in confusion like a swarm of astonished bees. Until now he had never dared put his conscience under too close a scrutiny. What front-line soldier can afford such a luxury? But now? In God's name surely the time had come to speak. But to whom? Holmers? Perhaps... Ziegler? Yes. But where would he find him? Why only officers?? The men had just as much right to live. They had tongues in their heads, hearts in their bodies. They were all Germans, weren't they? But my job isn't to talk or to ask opinions, it's to give orders, and have them obeyed. One of the young ones perhaps, one of the children with his life before him. Kumitsch for instance.

'Come on, old girl, you can do it,' coaxed Corporal Jung as he had done so often since that first drive to Monte Colle all those months – or was it years? – ago. Why not Jung, the hard-bitten, hard swearing soldier from Ulm. Dear Corporal Jung, please help me, I don't know what to do . . . He imagined Corporal Jung's expression with an inner smile.

The wipers had given up, as they so often did in heavy rain or snow, and the water poured down the windscreen in those looped curtains peculiar to a fishmonger's slab, shining in the sudden unwelcome sunshine.

'Rain's lifting,' said Jung tersely, putting his foot hard down.

'Hey, watch it in there,' shouted Corporal Halser. These were the last words of his short and active life. If he had let himself drop off the car he might possibly have gone on living. But he hung on, his nails scrabbling on the canvas hood while his death left the grey belly of the clouds and dived through the bright April afternoon.

The pilot of the Mustang fighter had been flying high, nervous of the hidden peaks, but now he jammed forward the stick and banking steeply, went into a dive towards the winding scrawl of the road. Twisting and jinking he swept between the mountains searching for targets. Out of the whole squadron he was the only one to have scored no kills during the last week of fine weather. Tanks, S.P.s, unwary trucks, even motor cyclists – all his comrades had swaggered in with something to claim.

He caught the sudden flash of sun on glass and just had time to see the car before he was past. At the end of the shallow defile he swung his machine in a tight turn and made his run, coming down on the desperately swerving car at close on three hundred miles an hour. The cannon shells raised little splashes of water round the vehicle; he saw a midget figure falling, the tiny pin

moon of an upturned face, then he was past, heading for the great bulk of a mountain. Hauling frantically on the stick he tried to drag the plane over the summit with tracer streaking past on each side. Something smashed into his legs but he felt no pain, only a crazy, screaming anger as hot oil spurted across his face, blinding him so that he did not see the rock face of Monte Colle or hear the loud cheers that greeted the shattering of his aeroplane and his body against the very peak of the mountain.

On the road von List and Corporal Jung dragged themselves clear of the wrecked Fiat. Blood streamed down the corporal's face from a slash of jagged glass across his forehead. The car lay on its side with one front wheel still slowly spinning.

'She was worth more than one bloody plane,' said Jung in a dazed voice, wiping vaguely at the red mess of his face. Black, oily smoke hung above Monte Colle. They could hear the distant popping of burning ammunition.

'Halser,' said von List. 'Where the hell's Halser?' He leant against the broken car, breathing heavily. Then he started back along the road, over the little black craters of the cannon-shells, to where Corporal Halser lay face down in the muddy slush with his back a gaping glutinous hole from shoulders to waist.

It wasn't until he reached the car and picked his cap from the mud that von List noticed he had been hit. The pulpy remains of his left forefinger hung by strings of skin, dancing like a horrible little puppet whenever he moved his hand.

Corporal Jung tied his handkerchief tightly round the finger and clapped a field-dressing on his own wound.

'Come on, sir. There's nothing we can do here. They've both had it.' The cannon fire had blasted the engine to twisted scrap and one side of the car was like a badly opened tin.

'We all have to go sometime,' growled the corporal. 'At least it was quick for both of them. One thing, he won't have to walk.' Without looking back Corporal Jung went off down the road. He had been quite fond of Halser, even more of his car.

Slowly von List followed, holding his mud-stained cap.

'They'll give you the wound badge in gold for this,' said Medical Officer Buchner as he snipped and sewed at von List's amputated finger-stump. Once or twice the latter drew in his breath sharply but otherwise made no sound.

'You're pretty good at your job, Buchner,' he said, when it was finished.

'Thank you. You'd better have a glass of medical brandy, sir.' As he poured it he asked: 'How've you been sleeping lately?'

'Much the same as anyone else, I imagine.'

'I could give you something if you like.'

Von List drank down the brandy in two quick gulps. 'I'll manage.'

'You're going to have a pretty hefty load on your shoulders from now on,' said Buchner seriously. 'A great many men – '

'Will depend on me? I don't need to be reminded of that, Herr Doktor. Just keep your little knives sharp – ' He winced suddenly from the pain in the waking nerves. 'God Almighty' he burst out, 'd'you think I want to fill this place of yours?'

'No, sir,' said Medical Officer Buchner very softly. 'I think you want to see the children live. I think you want to see them grow up to serve their country without guns in their hands. That's what I think, Herr Oberst.'

The two men faced each other for a long moment. It seemed as if Lieutenant-Colonel von List was about to answer, but instead he turned on his heel and left the Aid Post.

The Doctor watched him walk slowly away, head bent forward, unaware of the salutes he received as he went towards the Orderly Room.

'He looks done in,' remarked Sergeant Eisner who had joined Buchner. 'I wouldn't be in his shoes, not at the moment I wouldn't.' His tone was sympathetic.

'What will he do?' murmured Buchner almost inaudibly. 'What the hell will he do?'

Sergeant Eisner stood listening uneasily to the thunder of the war. It seemed to come from every side so that the Spring air shivered and trembled against his ear-drums.

The battle for the mountains was getting into its stride, and only in the pretty little village of Rocca San Michele was the sunshine undisturbed.

He dried his sweating hands on the grubby white overall and went back to see to the mild concussion of Corporal Jung.

Captain Stempfe was very agitated by his Commanding Officer's dishevelled appearance and he could hardly tear his eyes from the tiny red stain showing at the corner of the bulbous bandage that swathed the whole hand.

'It's only blood,' said von List. He looked at Major Holmers' latest alterations to the battle-map. 'They've gone back a long way.' He studied the worsening picture. Already the black American arrows were probing deep for Modena.

In the east the British spearhead stabbed dangerously close to Imola. On both sides the claws of the crab were stretching beyond Monte Colle, northwards, scratching at the fringes of the plains.

'What's your view of the situation, Stempfe?'

'My view, Herr Oberst?'

'Yes, Stempfe, your view.' Von List mastered his angry impatience, looking at the stupid, sheep face with a little smile.

'Well, to be honest – may I speak frankly, Herr Oberst? Well, whichever way you look at it – '

'Which way do *you* look at it?'

Stempfe averted his gaze from the bleeding hand, glancing bout him quickly and furtively.

'It does not appear too healthy. Just at this moment, that is,' e added hurriedly.

'Not too healthy!' von List laughed, and it wasn't a very nice ound. 'My dear Stempfe, if there were any prizes going for nderstatement – ' His finger throbbed nastily, the pain reaching ell above the elbow.

'Where is Major Holmers?' he asked suddenly.

'I – ' He obviously had no idea.

'Never mind. See if you can get hold of the Quartermaster. I ant to see him.'

The Adjutant scuttled out. Von List sat listening to the steady mble of the battle for Modena. So this was the last act. At last, ter these incredible years, the war was expiring in one final aze of fire and death. For a wounded animal was never more ngerous than during its last murderous moments . . . how many ore must die before the enemy burst into the plains?

He rang for Sergeant-Major Tomas.

'Sorry to see that, sir. You're like a bloody magnet for all the d iron flying about.'

'Has Halser been brought in?'

'Yes.'

'Better put him beside Wedderkop.'

'Yes, sir.'

'What about Jung? He's going to be like a cat that's lost her ttens without that car of his.'

'He's next door. Turned up from the Aid Post with a bloody eat bandage round his head, sat himself down without a by-ur-leave and announced he was going to stay with you when-er you put your nose outside.' Tomas grinned happily. 'Said u needed a nursemaid to look after you.' The grin widened. e's not far wrong either.'

'My compliments to the corporal and please tell him I very uch appreciate his concern for my well-being.'

'You'll take him then?'

'If it pleases everyone, yes, I'll take him. But can he still walk, er sitting with his backside glued into a driving seat for the last od knows how many years?' He was more touched than he ed to show by Jung's action.

'Things aren't too good, Tomas.' And that's just about as uous as Stempfe's summing-up.

'We've been through worse, sir.'

'Yes.' But we were strong then. We thought of defeats as mere -backs in those days; we had new armies to back us up, to e our place. We were the Greater German Wehrmacht, he ought with bitter nostalgia, and nothing could stand against us. t now . . .

'We got out of the mess at Smolensk,' said Tomas. 'And w
came back to smash the bastards into jelly. We'll get out of thi
muck-up, you'll see.'

'Yes,' answered von List, holding tightly to his bandage
hand. 'But in what state? Answer me that, Tomas.'

'They'll fight, sir. You needn't have any fears of that. Thi
battalion will fight all right.'

'Tell me something, Tomas. D'you want to see your hom
again?' Von List saw by the frown on the large, square face, tha
some considerable conflict was taking place in Tomas's minc

'If I see it, I see it,' he said woodenly. He had seen this look o
the officer's face once before: when the remnants of the platoon
freezing alive in summer uniforms, out-gunned and out-fough
had crept back through the snow, back to the west. Men ha
cried from the pain of the cold, moving like tattered ghost
among the dark and deadly forests of Russia, and with thos
beaten soldiers had gone the same stink of defeat that hovere
above them now. At one moment the retreat had come close t
rout, and it was just previous to that moment Tomas had see
this same expression on his officer's face. A mask of pity, under
standing and sudden racking indecision. But it had passed, an
this slight, tired man slumped in the chair had risen to the height
turning his scarecrow men to face the Russians, to fight wher
they stood. And, by Christ, thought Tomas, not many men coul
have done that.

'They'll do what you tell them, Herr Oberst,' he said. 'Wha
ever it may be.'

'Tell, Sergeant-Major? Surely this is a time for asking?'

'May I say something, sir?'

Von List nodded without looking up.

'Out of all the officers I've ever served under you're the on
who's got most out of the men by asking. Not by shouting you
head off but by bloody well leading them.' He stood there lik
a great bull challenging anyone to argue. After an appreciab
pause von List answered in a low voice:

'Thank you, Tomas.'

Captain Stempfe returned followed by the Quartermaster.

'Will there be anything else, Herr Oberst?' demanded Toma

'I don't think so, thanks. Oh, yes. I'll want you to come wit
me tonight. I want to go round the positions. Depending o
what's happening by then, but probably as soon as we can aft
dark. Ah, Sauer. Have a seat.'

Quartermaster Sauer was puffing heavily, having come all th
way from the reserve company where he had been seeing to th
supply of machine-gun ammunition.

'I want you to issue all your stock of rations.' Von List we
straight to the point. The Adjutant made a note on his pad.

'All of them, sir?' The little piggy eyes opened to their fullest xtent.

'Yes, Sauer, all of them. Every tin of food, every ounce of obacco, every – '

'But, Herr Oberst – ' Sauer was flabbergasted. To be sure he ad an extremely well-stocked store. But, at the same time, he lso had one of the last eight-tonners in the Division in which to ransport his hoard of supplies, and it had been no part of the uartermaster's plans to see them snatched from him at the last inute. After all there were such things as hams and large quanties of salami sausage – his shrewd brain was racing. Invaluable uring the next uncertain weeks. And now he was expected to catter the fruits of all his cunning transactions among the bunkrs of the front-line! This was all too much.

'Nothing is too good for the men at a time like this,' observed on List with quiet amusement. 'I'm sure you'll agree.'

'Yes, Herr Oberst. Of course. Nothing. I entirely agree.' aptain Stempfe chuckled to himself. The fellow looked like a g in a pen too small for it. He himself had never got so much as sniff at any of the delicacies. Now he's getting it!

'The only thing is, sir – ' But the Quartermaster got no further. on List sat up with a jerk, banging the table with the flat of his and.

'You heard what I said. Everything. Is that understood?' His es blazed with a sudden flare of anger.

The unfortunate Sauer could not trust himself to speak; he felt might suddenly break down and howl.

'And now that we've got that little point cleared up,' said von st kindly, 'I want every available round of ammunition moved to the forward positions tonight. Get mules, get men, get anying, but that stuff's got to be up there before morning. And y more you can scrounge. All right?'

'All right, sir,' said Quartermaster Sauer in a dazed voice, aring furiously at the grinning Stempfe. 'It'll be there.'

'If you say it will then I can leave things in your hands with e greatest confidence,' said von List sincerely, thus partly icking the swelling balloon of Sauer's outraged anger.

'One of the best Quartermasters in the business, Stempfe. Ask m for a pair of silk stockings in the middle of a battle and he'd oduce them.'

'With the girl inside them, Herr Oberst,' said Captain Stempfe, ddenly seized by a most daring humour.

'If I'm needed, I'll be in my room.'

'Very good, sir.' Stempfe leapt to his feet.

'I shall keep an eye on the situation, Herr Oberst, until the urn of Major Holmers.' All the Adjutant's battle gear lay on floor beside his chair: helmet, pouches, water-bottle, rolled oundsheet.

'Prepared for anything, eh, Stempfe?'

'Anything, Herr Oberst, yes.'

'That's right,' said von List solemnly. 'One never knows.'

'No, sir. At a time like this – '

'At a time like this one cannot help envying those lucky gentlemen of the Staff with their large and swift motor-cars.' Stempfe seemed to have stopped breathing; his prominent underlip hung slack.

'Surely the Herr Oberst is not suggesting – ?' His whispered words were awestruck.

'Of course,' said von List, still smiling the smile that Stempfe always found so completely inscrutable, and as if he had suddenly remembered, 'Of course the job on hand is to defend this mountain of ours, if necessary until there are none of us left. Isn't that it, Stempfe?' But before the bewildered Adjutant could reply, von List had gone.

Private Shulz was polishing the Colonel's best boots, whistling a tuneless rendering of the 'Blue Dragoon', squinting along the gleaming black jack-boot on his arm as if it were some kind of highly polished gun. His simple blue eyes widened as they spotted the bandaged hand.

'May one respectfully ask,' he began.

'An aeroplane, Schulz. An extremely unpleasant and noisy aeroplane.'

'Have we no planes, sir? What's happened to the Luftwaffe? Don't they help us any more?' All the indignation of a man who feels he has been let down.

'We aren't the only ones they've got to help.' He lay down on the bed. 'You might bring me a glass of water and get out a couple of aspirins. Then call me in an hour.'

When he got back to the Orderly Room, von List found Major Holmers on the telephone. The Adjutant was out of the room and all his kit had gone with him.

'Yes, Colonel,' said Holmers in a dead voice. 'Yes, I understand. Yes, as soon as he comes in. Yes, Colonel, of course. Yes, Colonel.' He put down the receiver.

'Clausitz,' he said. 'I said you were out. How's the hand?'

'Sore. What did he want?'

'He wants us to send out raiding patrols tonight.'

'Patrols! What the devil for?'

'Says it'll put the British off balance. I know, sir. I agree with you. It's bloody silly.'

'I didn't say anything. Off balance? Might as well expect half a dozen mice to topple over an elephant.' Von List paced angrily. 'Well, I'm not going to do it,' he burst out. 'And that's final, Holmers. Off balance! We're not facing a bunch of recruits.'

'I didn't think you would,' said Major Holmers calmly.

'If that's his only contribution to the epic and in every way
rious defence of Monte Colle, well, all I can say is – ' He bit
ck the boiling words. 'Forget what I said, Holmers.'
I never heard a thing, sir.'
There was something about von List he had never seen before:
clenched tautness, as if a scream might explode with sudden
attering violence or a great shout of uncontrollable laughter.
reminded the older man of a wild animal, smouldering behind
bars of an invisible cage. It was a look that Major Holmers
d seen in the trenches during the last days of the First Great
ar. Next door Sergeant-Major Tomas could be heard letting
steam at one of the clerks. As background to his powerful
es the whole sky throbbed to the aeroplane engines and the
tant roar of guns that never ceased.
'Twenty-six years ago,' said Major Holmers slowly, lighting
pipe, 'I crawled out of a dug-out in the Argonne with my
nds up.' He drew hard at the pipe, watching von List through
little smoke-screen. 'For me the war – or at least that war –
s over.' His eyes showed how vividly he remembered.
October 1918. I was the only one alive in that dug-out. My
nds lay scattered in bits in a foot of mud and water, no more
to anyone, and I came out to surrender. A small American
k me prisoner. Me, a proud German officer of nineteen.' Von
t had sat down and did not appear to be listening; he stared
adily at the clumsy red bulk of his bandaged hand.
I can still see him now,' said Holmers. 'With water on his
sses and a bayonet as big as himself. His helmet was too big
him. A soaking little mushroom almost as frightened as I
.' He relit his pipe. Von List looked up at the flare of the
tch.
That was very interesting,' he said flatly. 'You must tell me
re some day. We must exchange reminiscences at old-soldiers'
nions. I look forward to that.'
At the time,' said Major Holmers quietly, 'it seemed a pecu-
ly undignified finish to a boy's dream of glory.'
But at least it allowed you to live and fight another day.' The
se of the diving plane rose to a high crescendo and, as it pulled
of the dive, the floor shook to the heavy impact of bombs not
away.
If someone somewhere had used his head a little more,'
lmers went on, choosing his words with care, 'then possibly
friends might have lived longer and been of slightly more use
Germany and themselves.' They listened to the next dive. As
bombs burst so an excited Stempfe came clattering in with
spectacles glinting in the shadow of the steel helmet.
Good God, Stempfe,' exclaimed von List, restored to good
nour by the sight of his fully equipped Adjutant. 'Are you
ng to throw them back single-handed?'

'Herr Oberst,' cried Stempfe dramatically. 'It looks as if th swine are bombing Regimental Headquarters.' His voice w swallowed up in a wild outburst of anti-aircraft fire.

'Shall I sound the general alarm, sir? Had we not better l prepared for – ' the man was dancing about in his excitement 'for an attack at any minute?'

'While there are still men like you, Stempfe, what can Ge many possibly have to fear?' To the casual eye Lieutenan Colonel von List seemed quite himself again, gently mockin and smiling. But behind the light-hearted words Major Holme could still hear the tight, vibrating hint of a man keeping himse under control with supreme effort.

Von List went out with the Adjutant. Major Holmers sto slowly packing his pipe.

A man with a bandolier across his chest and a large black mou tache across his swarthy face stood in the middle of a group men sitting or squatting in the fading warmth of the afterno sun. Sentries watched from the crests of the little hills surroun ing the bushy hollow.

'You're sure you can find the way?' asked the man for th second time. 'In the dark?'

'With a full moon?' The girl's voice was scornful. 'I was bo there, I know every inch of the place, I tell you.' She stood u facing the leader of the partisan group, glancing round the othe with her long, angry eyes, her mass of chestnut hair glowin darkly in the sun. A few men murmured appreciatively.

'If you don't trust me,' she flashed, with her hands on her wi hips, 'then you'd better find someone else to lead you there.'

'Cool off,' said the leader calmly. His eyes rested reflectively the bold beauty of his mistress. Even in stained battledre trousers and short leather jerkin Marielena could make me tongues run quickly round their lips and the sweat break benea their arms.

'She's all right, Luigi,' called a big, bearded fellow with jagged white scar across his dirty forehead. 'She took us to th right place the last time.'

'Yes,' shouted other voices. 'Without her we'd never have c up that Tedeschi column. She's as good a soldier as any of us

'If she says she knows the way, then I'll follow her,' said good-looking youth wearing two German automatic pistols his belt.

'You'd follow her anyway,' put in someone else. There w laughter silenced by their leader.

'This is the most important operation attempted by th brigade,' he said. 'The British are depending on us to do a go job. If we achieve success, then the task of the men attackin Monte Colle will be made that much easier. And, *Dio mio*,

wouldn't like to attack that mountain.'

'Not with a man like this Colonel of theirs in command,' said the girl.

'Yes,' muttered the bearded man. 'We've heard of him.'

'So we want the man dead,' said the leader. 'Or prisoner.'

The great bastion of Monte Colle stood silent and undisturbed, casting its dark shadows across the stark, moon-washed ground where every boulder stood silvery in a little black sea. On each side the front was ablaze and the savage sounds of battle rolled among the mountains.

Sergeant Blaun stood in the weapon-pit facing to the west, watching the pale flicker of the guns and the occasional red spurt of tracer beyond the dark hump of the reserve position where Number Three Company lay ready to counter-attack. Won't be long before they're needed, thought Blaun. We're not going to get away with it for much longer, sitting around like a crowd of spectators at a cock-fight. He looked at his watch. Twelve-twenty. The C.O. should be coming back soon. 'Just going up to the forward companies, Blaun. Expect us back by one o'clock.' Just going for a little toddle in the moonlight. That's it, Herr Oberst. Enjoy the scenery. It's liable to change at any moment. He and Tomas and that perisher, Jung. Nice to see you on your feet for a change, Jung, like the rest of us bloody footslogging apes. Time to go round your command, Blaun. Ten men! Sergeant Blaun spat into the moonlight. Not that he much cared about anything since the death of Telling.

'All right over there?' he called out.

'Fine, Sergeant.' The Spandau men in the next pit were wide-awake.

'I'm going to have a look at the others.' He had his little army posted round the perimeter of Battalion Headquarters in five positions covering the tracks leading into Rocca San Michele.

'Watch out for the C.O.,' he said, getting out of the pit. He stretched, yawned, and let out a deep and satisfying belch.

'Ah, that's better. Don't go loosing off without – '

'*Wer da?*' He heard the sharp challenge from the machine-gun pit, then a single shot.

Sergeant Blaun flung himself flat with his Schmeisser in a firing position.

'Watch your front!' His roar was cut off by a sudden fusillade of shots. The air crackled and whined. 'Alarm!' he yelled. The Spandau tore off a long burst and the red stream of bullets scattered the dark shapes running in with wild shouts. Four of them came for where Blaun lay unseen. He waited till they were very close, then leapt to one knee, spraying the bullets with deadly skill. The figures spun, doubling up; one clawed at its throat, staggering, drenching the Sergeant with a great spout of blood as

it crashed beside him.

The moonlight was full of darting figures and little stabs of flame; a grenade went off and a man was screaming. Voices were yelling in Italian, and the bullets buzzed and sang among the buildings.

'Alarm,' bawled Captain Stempfe, as he came tearing out of his billet, cramming on his helmet, struggling with the strap of his holster. 'Alarm! Everyone out!' He tripped over a body and measured his length, losing his spectacles. Cursing with excitement and terror he tore out his pistol in time to shoot at a vague blur springing at him. 'I got him!' screamed Stempfe at the top of his voice. 'I got him!' His pistol went off by mistake, but he was too mad with excitement to notice the heavy thud near his right boot. He dropped on his knees groping for his glasses.

The partisans rushed among the little houses, now and then bursting through a door, tossing a grenade through a window.

Frantically Major Holmers spun the handle of the field telephone, crouching on the floor of the Orderly Room, below the level of the window.

'Huth? You can hear what's going on. They may try to get out past you – ' he ducked as a swathe of bullets stitched a long row of holes across the maps. 'No, don't leave your positions. We can cope. Try and get them as they go back.' He coughed from the plaster dust filling the room. A man appeared in the doorway. Holmers shot him in the stomach, then again in the head as he stepped over the writhing body.

'Get that fire out!' Flames were licking up the walls of the Aid Post, and he could hear the shrieks of the wounded men as they felt the first hot breath of the flames.

'Let them have it! Let the bastards have it!' That was Blaun. Major Holmers broke into a run. The fire was getting a hold; the shrieks were wilder. A figure appeared in front of him, silhouetted by the flames, shouting in a flood of Italian. Holmers fired twice and missed; he saw the glint of the knife as the man came for him. He fired again, seeing with amazement the black hole spring between the eyes, the little dark fountain. He hurried on. 'Is that you, sir? Blaun here. I think we've seen them off.' A few scattered shots and yells; pounding feet and a powerful voice shouting orders in Italian, then, except for the ugly crackle of the flames and the voices of the men getting the wounded to safety, it was over.

With a chain of buckets from the well they managed to save part of Buchner's little hospital.

'I don't know where the hell we're going to put the new ones,' said the doctor. He mopped his streaming face. Four Germans required his attentions; another two needed groundsheets and holes in the thawing ground. As well as these there were five wounded Italians and an unknown number of dead lying here

and there among the houses and out in the scrub.

'We'll have to send them back to Bologna.'

'Hang on for a couple of days,' said Major Holmers, 'and we can all go back together.' They walked slowly towards the Orderly Room.

Captain Stempfe, still searching vainly for his glasses, looked up to see the hazy shapes. Raising his pistol with a sharp cry of defiance, he fired.

'Look out, you bloody fool,' roared the frightened Holmers, 'It's Major Holmers!'

'Thank God, sir,' gasped the Adjutant. 'I'm wounded.' Blood was soaking from his right foot through which, all unknown to himself, he had shot a neat, round hole.

'But I got one! I put paid to one of the swine. Look at him lying there.' A sharp pain suddenly shot through Captain Stempfe's kneecap.

'By God,' he swore, 'I've been kneeling on them all the time.' For the first time since Holmers had known him, the Adjutant laughed in a very human way.

From the direction of Lieutenant Huth's positions there came the sound of small-arms fire and some confused shouting that soon died away.

'It sounds as if they'd run into Huth's sentries,' said Holmers.

'More hack work for Germany's top surgeon,' remarked Buchner from where he was examining Stempfe's foot.

'You're a hero, my dear fellow,' he said.

'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' answered Captain Stempfe modestly.

7

THE bullet-holes ran very neatly across the maps beyond the heads of the three prisoners. Reggio, Modena, Bologna, Imola. Hammered by a giant sewing machine. Von List looked away, back to the face of the girl, disturbed by some faint memory he could not trap. Her face was black with the soot they had plastered on for the raid; long strands of auburn hair hung down from under the stocking cap; there was blood on her slender hands and a long red scratch along her neck.

'Do you understand German?'

For the second time she did not answer but stared back at him with fiery contempt.

'What about you, then?'

In answer the bearded man with a scar across his forehead spat

hard and accurately at the table. Sergeant-Major Tomas started forward with fists clenched.

'Leave him' said von List evenly. 'I daresay that in his position one might be tempted to do the same.'

The third man, a good-looking youth with a split and swollen lip, broke into a torrent of Italian. Tomas punched him once in the kidneys and he broke off the angry tirade, bent and gasping.

'We'll have no more of that, Tomas. This isn't Gestapo headquarters.' The Sergeant-Major stepped back against the wall.

'You won't have much longer to behave like this,' said the bearded man in slow German. 'Soon you'll be back where you belong. And, by God Almighty, that's where you're going to stay. Finish. *Kaputt*.' He drew his finger across his throat in a quick, savage gesture. The girl's mouth twisted in a cruel smile as she nodded her head in agreement.

'You're Russian, aren't you?'

The man stared straight at von List. His eyes were small and glittering, like those of a cornered wild boar.

'Yes,' he said, 'I am, you murdering, bloodstained German.' Von List's lips tightened as he looked at the man, and the tiny pulse in his jaw began to beat. He did not speak. The room was lit by lamps, for the generator had been damaged during the attack, and the air was warm and smoky.

'Tell me,' he asked. 'What was the object of your visit tonight?'

'To kill you.' The girl spoke for the first time, hissing the words.

'So you do understand.' Von List picked up the paper-knife, holding it as a dagger. 'Am I so important, then?' he said with a little smile.

'Cut the head off a chicken,' said the Russian, 'and the rest of it won't get far.'

'You weren't the only one,' added the girl. 'There are plenty of chickens.'

'I could have you all hanged. I suppose you realise that?'

'The master butchers have taken to hanging their prisoners of war,' the Russian snarled. 'It's cheaper than having to feed them. That's what we are – prisoners of war.' His voice had risen.

'Take them out, Sergeant-Major, and lock them up.'

As the partisans were hustled from the room the Russian shouted abuse, struggling with the two guards.

'. . . filthy swine of a German. Go back to the pigsty you came from and leave the world in peace!' The door slammed. Major Holmers came forward from the corner where he had been leaning in his usual nonchalant attitude. He shoved one of his little cheroots into his mouth.

'God, they hate us,' said von List, but there was no surprise in his voice.

'What will you do?'

'With them? I don't know.'

'If Clausitz hears you've got prisoners he'll want them for himself.'

'Very true.'

The artillery of both sides, stirred up by the shooting and the flames, were going at it hammer and tongs, so that the table trembled beneath his injured hand. Through the huge whispering sigh of the German shells passing close above the village they heard someone at the door.

'Come in.' Lieutenant Huth stepped smartly into the quivering lamplight.

'I must congratulate you,' said von List at once. 'You acted with speed and decision. Good. In fact, if it hadn't been for you and the redoubtable Sergeant Blaun things might have been in more of a mess.'

'Thank you, Herr Oberst.'

'You look as if you'd seen a ghost, Huth,' said Major Holmers. The young officer was pale and about him there hung an aura of flustered agitation.

'Sir down,' said von List. But Huth did not move.

'Herr Oberst,' he burst out, 'May one ask what will happen to the prisoners?'

'One may. But why this interest? Are they friends of yours?' he asked lightly. Then – something in Huth's expression combined with his own stirring memory – the possible truth struck him. Had this place not once been her home?

'The girl,' he said very gently. 'Did she, I wonder, ever own a donkey?'

Lieutenant Huth nodded, quite speechless.

'And you drew a picture of her? A remarkably fine picture, if I may say so.' He turned to Holmers. 'I knew I had seen her somewhere. As soon as she came in – '

'But – will they be executed sir?'

'She was a friend?'

'I met her when I was here with the advance party, Herr Oberst.'

'And now you want me to spare her life.' Von List left his chair and walked up and down past Huth who turned his head anxiously to follow the Colonel's every movement.

'They're soldiers, sir. Like we are. They can't be hanged as if they were criminals. Surely, Herr Oberst, we can't do that to her.'

He sounded as if he was in love with the girl. Von List ran his finger along the bullet-holes. If it had been Ledi – He remembered the girl hanging from the S.S. gallows: her black tongue and frozen eyes bursting from her head. If it had been Ledi? The penalty for guerrillas bearing arms against the German Reich – death. In every country of Europe – death. Old, young, men, women – death. He resumed his seat. He'd need a new

bandage; it was mud-stained from the slippery journey down the mountain. Inside the dirty wrappings the finger was being torn by little red-hot hooks.

'Whilst I have anything to do with it, they won't die,' he said at last. 'And now I suggest you get back to your company, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, Herr Oberst. Thank you, Herr Oberst.'

'And, Huth. Keep them on their toes. Anything may happen during the next twenty-four hours, and I want every man of this battalion to be ready.'

'Yes, sir.' With shining eyes Lieutenant Huth marched himself out.

'Funny how things work out, isn't it?' Major Holmers picked tiny flakes of cheroot off his lips. 'Because of him she could easily wind up a corpse.' He stretched. 'Someone must be laughing somewhere. God, I'm tired.'

'I want to see her again,' said von List.

'Now?'

'Yes, now.'

He saw her alone this time.

'Your name is Marielena Crespi.' She gazed at him with steady hatred. 'It doesn't matter. But I believe you knew one of my men. Kalbach. Ernst Kalbach.' She did not move a muscle. 'I could hand you over to the Gestapo. But there wouldn't be much point in that really. Not now.' Yes, he could imagine it must be easy to fall in love with such a girl.

'He said to tell you this – '

'He's dead, then?'

'Yes. He died of wounds received during heavy shelling. But before he died he said, "Tell her I understand".'

The hatred had faded from her eyes.

'I think you're a good man,' she said hesitantly. Neither of them spoke. The guns were quiet but he could hear rain on the roof.

'Unlike so many of your countrymen,' she said, with her old spirit. He acknowledged her slow words with a little nod.

'Is any country entirely black?' he asked her quietly.

'No,' she said honestly. 'It is not. But you are going to have a lot to answer for, all of you, even the good among you.' They talked together for a little while until the guards took her away.

'I cannot promise anything,' he said as she stood up.

'For you are a man who likes to keep his word.'

He nodded.

Taking his stick he walked slowly through the cold, dawn rain of April 13th.

'I'm tired, Trudi,' he whispered as he fell fully clothed on to the bed. 'Oh, God, I'm so tired.'

8

The afternoon rain dripped through the temporary roof of groundsheets and truck covers erected to shelter the wounded, forming little pools and splashing into pails. Gone was Medical Officer Buchner's model Aid Post. His patients lay crammed close together along the blackened walls, and Sergeant Eisner pushed his way among them with a harassed expression on his normally placid face. There was a low sound of whimpering complaint in keeping with the grey and dismal sky from which the heavy spring showers came bucketing with monotonous repetition.

'You won't be dancing on that foot of yours for some time to come.' Lieutenant-Colonel von List stood looking down at his Adjutant.

'I'll be there, Herr Oberst. It takes more than this to keep a Stempfe down.' His grin was sickly, but he was bearing his painful wound with a stoical courage that rather surprised von List. Water splashed off the groundsheet covering the end of his bed. 'Now they're trying to drown me.' He became suddenly serious.

'May I with all respect say how sorry I am about the death of Major Holmers.'

'I think we all are,' said von List quietly.

'At this stage of the war, and after all he has been through. A terrible blow to the battalion. Terrible. A very fine man, Major Holmers, very fine indeed.'

'Yes.'

He took his leave of Captain Stempfe and went out, followed unwillingly by a Trudi loath to leave the exciting smells of that interesting place. She was fond of him by now and seemed to have accepted the sudden disappearance of her previous master.

'Come out of that!'

Wiggling her stumpy tail and grinning guiltily, the little dog removed her muzzle from the pail of raw remnants and trotted after him.

On his way he met the doctor. They talked about the sad death of Major Holmers. At exactly midday during the only bright spell between the showers Holmers, after twenty-nine years as a soldier, had been struck down and mortally wounded by a plunging machine-gun bullet fired from extreme range.

'If he'd been younger, could he have lived?'

'No,' said Buchner. 'Not even a young bull like Dobermann could have survived a bullet that went in through the back of his shoulder and came out through the front of his stomach. You can rest easy on that one, sir.' If it's any comfort, added the unspoken words.

All the flesh appeared to have been pared from the Colonel's face, so that the twin scars were deeper below the shiny cheek-bones and the dark-ringed eyes sunk far into the skull. He stood with the toe of his wounded leg pointed like a ballet-dancer's, barely touching the ground.

'By the way,' he said. 'You needn't tell Stempfe he was responsible for his own wound. He shot an Italian and got himself hit. Let's leave it like that.'

'He's pretty delighted with himself,' said Buchner. 'And now, what are the chances of getting them away? I've got three in there who'll certainly die if they don't get to a hospital damned quick.'

'You know the latest Divisional Order, Herr Doktor. No movements on the roads except after dark.'

'But one ambulance! For God's sake. I'll drive it myself.' Buchner's face was dark with anger.

'Haven't we let enough men die? In Heaven's name, how many more?' With a jerky salute the doctor walked away.

'Buchner! Come to the Orderly Room. I'll have a pass made out for the driver and I'll sign it. It won't mean anything, but at least the blame will be off anyone else's shoulders.'

'I'll say one thing,' said Buchner. 'You certainly take a lot on your own shoulders. A hell of a lot.'

* * *

The British battalion commander gave out the operation orders for the attack on Point 861 – that was what they called Rommel Ridge – and Monte Colle by the Twenty-First Guards Brigade.

'As you know, this is Phase One,' he said in the calm, unhurried tones he had used to give out the orders and plans for so many attacks. 'Our turn doesn't come until this phase is completed.'

'What time can we expect that to be?' asked Major Lumsden politely.

'H hour for the attack on Colle is seven tomorrow morning. They expect to have consolidated by ten at the latest.'

'Of course,' said Major Lumsden meditatively, 'they expected to get the Monstery in the first few hours.'

'Quite, Alan. Fortunately this isn't Cassino.'

'No,' said the other very doubtfully.

'We must be ready to cross the start-line and move up the mountain from nine onwards . . . ' He went through the whole operation, using a blackboard and sand-table model. Quite a number of questions were asked by his company commanders, all men who knew the snags and the gulf that yawned between theory and practice, especially in mountain warfare.

'Right then, just to go through the main points once again . . . After last light the tapes will be laid through the minefield to the

east of Casaglia – and I'm damned glad it's not us to clear the bloody things. The normal harassing fire throughout the night until H minus 60, then concentrated fire from the whole Divisional artillery on Point 861 and Colle. Mediums firing on targets to the rear. H minus 30, low-level attacks by the fighter-bombers on all known German gun positions. H minus 15, the mortars to blanket Colle with smoke and, for the last five minutes before the attack goes in, the heavies to join the party, plastering the upper slopes while the twenty-five pounder barrage leads the Coldstream up that bloody hill. All right?'

They nodded in silence, seeing all too clearly what was meant by his last words.

'At H minus five we move up to close behind the start-line ready to go as soon as we're needed . . .' After further tying up of details the order-group broke up and the officers went out into the rain.

They glanced with distaste at the weeping sky and the deep puddles forming so steadily round their muddy boots.

'Perhaps they'll call the whole damned thing off,' suggested a voice hopefully.

'Not again,' said Major Lumsden. 'Besides, they want to get things finished.'

'Look out!' shouted the Adjutant from the steps of the Orderly Room, flinging himself through the doorway.

So loud was the patter of the rain on the little trees and the tiles of the houses that they had not heard the sibilant warning of the mortar bomb. As it burst with a tearing cr-r-rump, scattering a deluge of mud and whirring steel, they hurled themselves in all directions.

'Sods!'

'Really! Is nowhere sacred to those sportsmen?'

They got angrily to their feet, scraping themselves clean, all of them except for Major Lumsden, who lay bleeding into the mud from his shattered arm.

'I'm awfully sorry,' he said shakily. 'But it doesn't look as if I'll be coming with you after all.'

* * *

For the first time during the last four days the war slept, and, except for an occasional burst of machine-gun fire, the stillness was uncanny. All along the front the German soldiers waited wearily and doggedly for the next mighty blow.

Lieutenant-Colonel von List sat alone in the Orderly Room. No Holmers. No Stempfe. He felt very alone. The arrows and the little coloured pins on the maps had not moved, for they had been the job of Major Holmers, and he lay in the wet earth beside Telling and Wedderkop and Halser. What did it matter? Of what use were maps any more when no one knew where any-

thing was; when half the formations written so boldly across the talc no longer existed?

But his eyes kept returning to the scarlet circles ringing the Monte Colle bastion untouched among a jumbled mass of defeat and confusion. A rock round which the sea might beat in vain for ever.

Sergeant-Major Tomas found him still sitting as he had been an hour before; he did not appear to have moved.

'That's Schulz, sir. He's brought you something to eat.' Schulz carried in a small tray with a bowl of soup and some bread and sausage.

'It's past midnight, Herr Oberst,' he said accusingly. 'And you haven't touched a thing since this morning.'

'Thank you, Schulz. Put it down there, please.' His stomach rebelled at the very idea of food.

'Will you be coming to bed, Herr Oberst? Everything is ready – '

'Soon. Get some sleep yourself. I may need you later.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Oberst.'

The Sergeant-Major shut the door.

'He's a good boy, that one,' he said. 'Tries hard.'

'There are plenty like him in this battalion, Tomas.' He swilled the warm soup round his mouth, trying to swallow.

'I had a telephone call about half an hour ago,' he said, steeling himself for another spoonful. 'The Regimental Commander, General Fritschauer has been wounded and his Chief of Staff killed. Colonel Clausitz now commands the Division.' He stirred the soup slowly. 'Divisional Headquarters was heavily shelled. Apparently there were a lot of casualties.' He went on stirring the soup, but still Tomas did not speak.

'Did you hear what I said, Tomas?'

'Yes, sir, I did.'

'You've no comment to make?'

'I've always understood that the General was a fine soldier. We shall miss him, especially at a time like this.'

'The orders are still the same,' said von List, leaning forward with his head in his hand. 'No retreat.'

'That's nice,' Tomas remarked caustically. 'That's something cosy to go to sleep on.'

'There won't be much sleep, not tonight, nor any other night, not while we're still defending our mountain.'

'*Our* mountain?' Tomas thought for a moment, then he grinned. 'Yes, I suppose it is our bloody mountain, when you come to think of it.'

'How long d'you think we can hold?' The Colonel glanced up from the shadow of his hand.

'Six hours. Twelve at the most. They'll throw the works at us this time. Every gun in the whole British army. They'll just sit

back and smash us to smithereens.'

'Yes. But you're wrong, Tomas. We can hold Monte Colle for days if we have to. While there's one man with a Spandau still left, not one British soldier could get up that slope. Good God, man, there's not enough cover for a beetle. Make no mistake about it, Tomas, the poor devils who have to attack our mountain will wish they'd never been born.' He paused, trying to smooth away the pain from his splitting head with slow strokes of his fingers.

'They've probably had their orders already. They'll come tomorrow. Today rather. Or the next day. And we must be ready for them, Tomas. Like we've always been before.'

'Oh, we've been ready for them, sir. All the way from Moscow to Monte Colle. And what's it done for us?'

'There are a lot of people in Germany at this moment who would give you a variety of short sharp answers to that question.'

Tomas laughed, but without much of his usual humour.

'There's something on your mind,' said von List. 'Let's have it.' Below the table he touched the dog with his foot – somehow he never felt she was his; it seemed as if Kalbach would one day come back and reclaim her. He bent down and patted her with his good hand.

'We've known each other a long time, Herr Oberst.' Whenever it was Herr Oberst then something special was coming. 'Can I speak to you straight?'

'Since when have you ever done anything else?'

'My brother was in Russia,' said Tomas in a hard voice. 'He was killed near Orel.'

'I'm sorry, I never knew that.'

'You don't know about Orel?'

'No.'

'That's where two things happened.' Tomas's eyes were bleak. 'A lot of Jews were slaughtered and shoved into pits, that was the first thing.' He paused, his large face disturbed by sudden strong emotion.

'Yes?' The encouragement was very soft.

'The other thing that happened at Orel,' said Sergeant-Major Tomas heavily, 'was the ambush of a German battalion.' Another pause. 'Such a bloody good ambush that only half a dozen men got out alive. And one of those was called Clausitz. Lieutenant-Colonel Fredrich Clausitz.' In the old days, thought von List wonderingly, I'd never have let him talk like this.

'Clausitz commanded that battalion,' said Tomas. 'And he left them to be cut to pieces by the Cossacks. By Christ, sir, is that what we've been fighting for? So that a cowardly bastard like him can get away with it? Look at him now. Commanding a bloody Division. Pushed up the ladder all the way. Lose six hundred men and finish up a bloody general.' Tomas was very red in the face.

'I know how you feel,' von List said sympathetically. 'But it's over and done with.' Not so long ago I'd have slapped him down, and very hard indeed. So that was what had eluded him for so long; that was the ugly little story of Colonel Clausitz, acting Divisional General. Not that it seemed particularly important any more. Except for Tomas. More of the story grew in his memory. It was Clausitz who had ordered the massacre. Yes, that was it. He'd had the Jews, some hundreds of them, butchered. There'd been some excuse of them being partisans, or helping the guerrillas, something like that. The details were hazy. Not that he'd been the only Wehrmacht officer to order summary executions – it hadn't all been the S.S. So he'd run away as well. And now he commands a Division. Incredible what knowing the right strings to pull, and the right women to flatter, can do to a man's career, even a swine like this one.

'What will you do after the war, Tomas?'

'After the war?' He was surprised by the sudden change of subject. 'I don't really know, sir. Probably spend the first month or so as drunk as I can get, then look round for another army to join. I don't know.' A terrible look of hopelessness spread across his face at the thought of the future.

'Still,' he went on more cheerfully. 'There's plenty to be got through before that happens.'

'Yes,' murmured von List.

'It's too quiet,' said Tomas, getting back to something he knew. 'Far too quiet. This is the way it used to be before an Ivan attack. D'you remember, sir?'

'Very well.'

'If we could stop the Russkis surely we can stop this lot?' His voice was pleading.

'This lot have everything that we haven't had for the last six months.'

'That's it, I suppose.'

Trudi emerged and sniffed the Sergeant-Major's large boots; reassured, she vanished under the table.

'There's one of them that doesn't have to worry anyway.' Tomas smiled for the first time that evening.

'Much as I'd like it, Tomas, I'm afraid we can't stay gossiping all night. Great events lie close ahead and we must be prepared for them.'

'Yessir.' This was how he used to be in the old days when he had only the weight of a platoon on his shoulders and when, very often, men didn't know if he was laughing or serious.

Sergeant-Major Tomas went back to the little den he shared with Quartermaster-Sergeant Rednitz, not knowing what to think.

'Well?' Rednitz lay drinking schnapps with his boots off.

'He looks bloody well all-in,' said Tomas.

'I don't wonder,' replied Rednitz. 'He's a pretty good bloke.'

He took another swig at the bottle.

'Me, I intend to meet them with the drunken gleam of battle in my eye.' He burped loudly. 'For Germany, Tomas, for poor bloody Germany.'

Von List rang up the three companies in turn. They all reported complete quiet in their sectors; they all had extra sentries posted and all the forward posts fully manned.

'Goodnight,' he said politely to each in turn. 'And now, Trudi, there's nothing more for us here. Except this.' He gave her the bread and sausage.

But, before he went to his room, he walked in the watery moonlight with Trudi trotting at his heels. To the East, from where the next dawn would come, the war was waking into uneasy life with the same sullen rumble that had been part of his waking hours for – was it really only five years? He removed his cap and let the night breeze play across his aching head. Twenty yards this way, twenty yards back, like a prisoner prowling helplessly in his cell. Those partisans, lying in the darkness expecting death, were they any more trapped than he was? Words spun through his head, tiny meteors flashing this way, that way, exploding in silent agony, trying to burst their way through the hot tight cake of his skull. . . . 'To the last man' . . . 'For the second time in my life we are beaten . . .' How could the same man carry two such contradictions in his mind? 'How much longer?' . . . 'How many more must die?' . . . And his father, the last time they had met before he died, strolling on the silver beach, talking through the soothing music of the sea . . . 'Whatever happens, Karl, always remember you were born a von List . . .' Zorndorf. Rossbach. Eylau. Leipzig. Waterloo. Sedan. The Somme. Poland. France. Moscow. Stalingrad. Monte Colle . . . a family of soldiers, fighters. No greater glory than to die, sword or machine pistol in hand . . . Always remember, Karl . . . And Ledi, who married a soldier. A soldier who had given his oath . . . 'Absolute obedience to the Führer . . . of the German people . . . Ziegler, Holmers, Kalbach, were they not also the German people? Were not Huth and Tomas and Kumitsch? A big shell groaned its way across the sky carrying death or mutilation to someone far behind the British lines. . . . We'll fight in the mountains, that's what the S.S. colonel had said. In the mountains where he had sat and watched his wife and child laughing in the snow . . . With the men of the old days, the men who marched with him to Dunkirk and across the blazing steppes to the Volga, with those men he might have held the mountain for weeks . . . Through the tortured intensity of his thoughts he heard the sound of engines and the squeak of tracks, then a voice asking for the officer in command . . . Germany would need these boys, the children, he thought of Holmers with a quick pang, she

would need them alive, not shredded among the rocks or helpless cripples dragging out the rest of their lives in beds or wheelchairs . . . He heard Sergeant Blaun's voice answering . . . Men like Blaun, Buchner, Roske . . . The engines stopped.

'Stay where you are till I get back.'

'*Jawohl*, Herr Leutnant.' Men were talking in low voices . . . And I will always be ready, as a valiant soldier, to risk my life in order to keep this oath . . . Trudi growled warningly.

'Herr Oberst, this officer would like to see you.' Two figures stood before him. Blaun went back to his restless tour of his depleted command.

'Lieutenant Bock, sir. Reporting with a troop of S.P. guns to be under your command.' He wore his peaked cap at a jaunty angle and seemed to be full of confidence.

'I see,' said von List. He tried to concentrate his thoughts. 'Very well then. Keep your guns where they are for the moment. Let your men get some sleep, but hold yourself in readiness for further orders.'

'Yessir.'

'How much ammunition have you, Lieutenant?'

'Enough, sir.'

'Enough? Enough for what exactly?'

'To assist in a counter-attack role,' said Bock smartly.

'And who do you suppose is going to be doing any counter-attacking?' And with that one short sentence the die was cast.

'I – well – I understood – '

'Never mind,' said von List, watching the first fringes of a long, black cloud nibbling at the bright edge of the moon.

'It's like mice at a cream cheese.' He felt light-headed and suddenly happier than he'd done for weeks. 'How d'you feel about things, Lieutenant? The war, for instance? How would you say it was going? Well, so-so, or badly?' He was smiling in the gathering darkness as the moon slowly went out. Thoughts, thoughts, chasing each other, confusing, contradictory, getting you nowhere. A brief exchange of talk with a complete stranger and things were suddenly very, very clear.

'Well, Herr Oberst – ' He shifted uneasily, hoping his men weren't listening.

'You want to throw away your life for Greater Germany, is that it? Well, you may have to yet. Never bank on anything, Lieutenant, never bank on anything, not even when you've got your hands round it. Tell me, are you familiar with your Socrates?'

Bock's mouth was a black pit of astonishment.

' "And when a man dies gloriously in war, shall we not say, in the first place, that he is of the golden race?" Would you agree with that, Bock?' A slight drizzle began to fall. Buchner would appreciate this, he thought. By God, he would.

'Well? I asked you a question, Bock.' The rain on his bare

head was very refreshing.

'If you mean,' he said in a low voice, 'Do I want to die at this stage of the war, then, Herr Oberst, the answer is No.'

'Well said, Lieutenant. I wonder how long it's taken before you knew your own mind. In case it interests you, it's taken me almost exactly eleven years. Allow me to shake your hand, Bock, and here's hoping you dodge the remaining shells and live to a ripe and happy old age doing whatever it is you're hoping to do once those guns of yours are scrap-iron, in whichever corner of Germany you come from. But, at the moment, hold yourself ready for orders from any quarter.' After a little pause he went on. 'Orders which you'll have to interpret in your own way, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, Herr Oberst.' Lieutenant Bock stood feeling as if he'd received a direct hit from a *Nebelwerfer*, his ideas in a sudden, unfamiliar turmoil, listening to this extraordinary Colonel calling for Schulz.

Slowly the stunned artillery officer returned to his guns, calling, in his turn, for the Troop Sergeant-Major.

The last direct descendant of the first Karl von List who had fought the Russians in 1758 sat at the little table in his room writing in his slow, careful hand. Beside the scratching pen were the picture of his wife and the Knight's Cross with the ribbon neatly laid out. The golden flame of the lamp flickered now and then, sending little ripples of shadow across the shining ink.

It was one-thirty on the morning of April 14th, 1945. When the page was covered he read through what he had written, adding two commas but otherwise making no changes. He signed his name, then folded the paper into three. All this he did very slowly and with great deliberation, now and then breaking off to listen to the sounds of the war outside.

As though satisfied by what he heard, he went to the door and called once again for Schulz. Then he began to take off his battle clothes, folding them as tidily as he could with a heavily bandaged hand and placing them on the camp-chair.

'My best uniform, please, Schulz.'

'At once, Herr Oberst.' If he'd asked for Churchill's head on a platter Schulz would have answered in the same way. Von List sat on the bed in his underclothes. His side was hurting badly, in place of the headache which had gone, and he tasted the fever in his mouth. Strange, it had been like this on the evening of his arrival to take over the defence of Monte Colle. He took another of his pills and dipped his head in the basin, then, rubbing the roughness of his chin, he asked for shaving water. He shaved and washed himself as best he could, brushing his hair with great care as if he were preparing to take Ledi out to dinner. He put on his breeches and field boots, then the tunic with all his decorations.

'I'm afraid you'll have to slit the sleeve.' Unwillingly Schulz cut the material of the dress tunic to let it pass over the bulk of the bandage.

'Seems a shame,' he muttered. 'A real shame. Stuff like this.' Private Schulz was bursting with curiosity as he did up the buttons and buckled the gleaming belt, but he did not dare speak.

'I won't need that,' von List nodded at the pistol holster in the orderly's hand. 'Just put it on the bed.' Schulz obeyed. Suddenly his eyes widened; he straightened up.

'The Herr Oberst is not thinking – ?' His tongue froze at the idea that had struck him. Such things were happening, everyone knew that. Even among Generals such things were happening. Von List smiled, shaking his head very slightly and picked up the Knight's Cross. Schulz put it round his neck with trembling fingers.

'See that it's straight,' said von List. He put on his cap, the cap that had travelled with him over so many hard, weary miles. Lastly he took up the photograph, regarded it carefully for a moment and put it in the pocket of his tunic.

'Right, Schulz, thank you.' His glance roamed slowly round the little room.

'Thank you for all you've done,' he said. 'And for all the nights' sleep you've missed.' He held out his hand. 'Good luck, Schulz, wherever you may land up.'

Private Schulz swallowed hard; he blinked rapidly and could not speak.

'If you like you can keep the *fufaika*. I seem to remember it fits you quite well. But don't let a Russian catch you in it.'

Von List went out, carrying the paper in his gloved hand, and his dog pattered after him.

Private Schulz remained at attention with his moist eyes fixed on the heavy quilted jacket hanging on the door.

Back in the Orderly Room von List summoned Sergeant-Major Tomas.

'Release the prisoners, Tomas.'

'Wouldn't they be safer where they are, sir?' He had not moved a muscle. 'I don't know what the Herr Oberst has in mind but – '

'You know damned well what he has in mind,' said von List.

'I wondered how long it would take you to reach this decision,' said Tomas.

'You're right about the prisoners. Leave them where they are. Now,' he added briskly. 'There's a hell of a lot to do and not much time. They'll attack today, Tomas, I'm sure of it. If it's dawn then we've got' – Tomas saw his lips working in silent calculation – 'about three to four hours before the shelling starts.'

'Could one ask what has brought the Herr Oberst to this – this answer?' enquired Tomas very formally.

'A lot of things, Tomas. Big things. Little things. Perhaps one day we'll get a chance to talk about them.' He got up and began his pacing. 'You realise of course I've absolutely no right to do this?'

'According to the book, no. But this bloody book's been out of date for too bloody long. Besides' – he grinned cynically – 'whatever that bastard Clausitz orders, then I'm for doing the opposite.'

'This sort of talk won't do, Tomas. You're speaking like an undisciplined civilian already.'

'God help me from becoming one of those.'

'But you will, we all will, and very soon.' He held out the folded paper. 'I'd like you to read this.'

The Sergeant Major read the words to himself, handed it back in silence.

'Yes, Herr Oberst,' he said simply.

'I want to do it right. Will you help me, Tomas? For the sake of the old days, of what we once were.'

'Compared to the Siberians, this'll be child's play,' said Tomas, standing straight and solid as a pillar of rock.

'Very well then. Get me the companies in the following order: Two. Three. One.'

'Lieutenant Dobermann last, sir?'

'Yes.'

Von List spoke to his three company commanders in turn on the telephone, phrasing his orders slightly differently to each one. And, of them all, Lieutenant Dobermann was the only one to raise any objection.

Sergeant-Major Tomas hurried back to his room, where he shook the snoring Rednitz.

'Wake up, you drunken old slob. I've got news for you.'

Von List put down the receiver after his conversation with Dobermann. Then for a short moment he let his head sink forward on to his arms.

'Oh God,' he repeated in a small, muffled voice. 'Oh, my God.' Straightening up, he smoothed the front of his tunic, and took a deep, slow breath. On his way out he reached up and ripped the middle of the map from the wall, the section where the Monte Colle massif was ringed in red, and threw it on the floor.

Outside the war had woken to life, like a heath fire that had smouldered below the hot ashes and suddenly leapt into new flame. To the west, to the east, the sky was ablaze with the flash of guns and mortars, long lines of tracer criss-crossed in the silver drizzle and the pounding roar of the artillery duels shook the ground and pressed hard against his ears.

Only Monte Colle stood dark and silent, waiting, menacing, while the war seethed and bubbled on every side like some monstrous molten cauldron.

'. . . I give it into your hands, Karl. See that the door stays

closed . . . ' And a man who must still have believed in what he was doing had answered, 'I will, sir.'

He waited, consumed with sudden tearing impatience, listening for the guns that would open this last bombardment of his mountain. If they were to open fire within the next hour then his reputation as a soldier, his honour, his very name would have been thrown away in vain.

Lit by the flickering red lightning of a battle no longer his concern, he stood very still, staring up at the shadowed slope of the mountain, and his face could have been carved from wood.

* * *

The long files of British infantry advanced slowly to the tapes marking the start line and lay down to wait in the cold drizzle that drifted across the great bulk of the mountain rising above them. The huge din of the other offensives brought little comfort. This was their own Calvary, this was where a lot of them were due to die within the next few hours, and nothing would bring comfort except the opening bars of the overture that was to deafen, daze, and finally smash the men who waited for them on those brooding heights.

They lay or knelt under their dripping ground-sheets and gas-capes and hoped numbly for their luck to hold.

* * *

Lieutenant Dobermann sat glaring at the telephone as if it had bitten him. Mingled with his rage was a look of bewilderment. Then he roared for Acting Sergeant-Major Hufnagel.

'We're to go back,' he snapped.

'Back, sir?'

'Yes. Back. Down the hill. To Bologna for all I know.'

'Yessir.'

Since taking over Weber's job three days before when the latter finally succumbed to his racking dysentery, Hufnagel had kept out of Dobermann's way as much as possible. There was little sympathy between the two men. He waited for the officer to speak, fixing his eyes on the most nubile of the naked women decorating the bunker.

'To conform with local tactical withdrawals,' sneered Dobermann. 'Great God, man. We could have held them for weeks.'

'Orders are orders, Lieutenant,' said Hufnagel piously.

'But this – ' Tears of anger sprang to Dobermann's pale eyes.

'When are we to move?' It couldn't be too soon for Hufnagel. He'd heard these sort of quiet spells before. They all ended the same bloody way, with the world going mad and too many blokes being blown to hell.

'Now. At once.' Lieutenant Dobermann thrust out his Iron Cross as if to give himself both confidence and inspiration and

began to issue his orders for the withdrawal, finishing with:

'The men in the forward posts are to remain to cover the movement of the rest of the company until they get orders to leave their positions from this headquarters . . .' He continued to rap out his instructions, a man of action once more. Jesus wept, thought Hufnagel, we could do all this in our sleep.

'Yes, Lieutenant. Number Two Platoon not to leave their positions till Number One's on its way down.' Someone's taking a hell of a bloody chance with this lot. If Tommy starts anything half way through. Christ! They'll be picking up the bits for the rest of the bloody war.

Privates Kumitsch and Damme prepared to leave Number Six post.

'Got everything?'

'Yes. No, the coffee.' Damme took the tin from the little cupboard shattered by the shell splinter so long ago.

'Come on, Heinrich, it'll soon be light.'

They started up the rocky slope, humping the Spandau and the belts, the last two men on the forward side of the mountain. To their right the coming dawn showed as a dim glimmer in the chilly darkness; thin clouds subdued the light of the moon to a pale milky wash. A little breeze from the west brought a faint hint of smoke, but once again the war had subsided into another of its menacing silences, startled now and then by ragged outbursts of small-arms fire.

'What's the time?'

'Ten to six,' said Kumitsch.'

'Wonder what's going on?'

'Why worry? We'll find out soon enough. We always do.' Kumitsch spoke like a veteran.

They reached the crest just before six. The sky was brightening and the dawn moon shone like a hazy silver coin. Kumitsch glanced back, down into the valley. The ruins of Casaglia were just visible rising from a thick, black sea.

From beyond the hills hugging the foot of the mountain the sky leapt with a sudden long flicker of yellow flame, like fire running along a powder train, and the crash of the guns was one continuous roar of sound.

'Run, Willi!' Kumitsch hurled himself forward, crouching as he ran from the crest of Monte Colle. But behind him Damme tripped and fell as the first tornado of shells struck the mountain and a big splinter opened the back of his thigh as neatly as a surgeon's knife. He clawed and squirmed his way frantically over the rocks, deafened by the noise of the bombardment, his mouth full of mud. The world was dark with smoke and flying debris, torn by the savage flash of explosive. Twice the blast of a big shell flung him sideways, but still he hauled himself on, leaving a wide

smear of blood like some half-severed insect.

Then he felt hands beneath his arms.

'Hang on, Willi. It's me.' Kumitsch got the wounded man on to his shoulders and retraced his steps, stumbling along like a drunkard. The shelling was confined to the forward slopes and the very summit and they were soon clear of the stinking darkness and into the growing light of the new dawn.

Kumitsch stopped for a rest. His friend lay beside him, spitting the muck from his mouth. Kumitsch did his best for the huge wound with his field dressing.

'Thanks,' said Damme. 'I don't know why you came back.''

'You've got the coffee,' said Kumitsch with a shaky smile. He hoisted Damme up again and they went on, away from where the whole long crest of their mountain was rising in black fountains to the sky, down to the rest of the battalion who waited in Rocca San Michele for what might come next, thanking God and their little Colonel that they were not still up there.

* * *

The British infantry rolled up their ground-sheets and fixed their bayonets, stamping the cold of the long wait from their feet. A white fog hung across the mountain, shot by the long curving streamers of the mortar smoke-bombs. Beyond it the mountain shook to the impact of the great shells from the heavies. Thousands of shells had fallen on their enemies and now, in a few moments, they would start the long climb – another long climb – to see what was left. Knowing what to expect the guardsmen leant on their weapons in silence, hearing the German shells searching the little hills that had been their homes for so long. Officers consulted their watches; uttered words of encouragement.

The sun of a new day rose slowly behind the mountains and, as it appeared, the smoke began to thin. Men checked their rifles; one or two talked nervously or tried to make a brave joke.

In front of them the jagged remains of Casaglia topped the little ridge over which they must pass before the real work of the day began.

With a screech and rush the barrage that was to take them up this last mountain blocking the way to the plains, sprang to life a hundred yards to their front.

'Get ready!'

Aeroplanes screamed over, heading for the German guns. On the ground the men who fought on their feet, who killed their enemies as living men and not as scurrying dots, spat on their hands, made sure the bayonets were secure, that grenades were handy, and started forward at the shrill blast of the whistle.

Slowly the barrage crept up the steepening slope in a solid wall of steel and flame.

'Keep spread out! Don't bunch!'

German mortars searched the endless slope, here and there bowling over the climbing men like clumsy rabbits.

Up and up they went, cursing the weight of their equipment, waiting for the first deadly crackle of the Spandaus.

9

THE men of the First Battalion, 68th Grenadier Regiment, lay concealed from the air among the oak and chestnut trees at the foot of the mountain just by Rocca San Michele. They discussed the present development and many and varied were the ideas put forward as they glanced uneasily up at the summit of Monte Colle.

'Looks like a bloody volcano. God help anyone caught in that.' The whole top of the mountain belched and spouted flame and shattered rock.

'The Tommies'll be behind this barrage.'

'Then what the hell are we doing down here, sitting on our bloody arses?'

'The C.O. knows what he's doing.'

'Yes, he's right there. Von List's got his head screwed on pretty tight. He knew this lot was coming and got us out of it, just in time. Hey, Kumitsch, you were the last up there. Didn't you see the Tommies coming up the bloody hill?'

'He was too busy being a bloody hero again,' shouted someone, out with a certain respect in his tone.

'Tommy takes it, then up we go again and send him packing. Stands to reason.'

'Take a look at Dobermann,' advised Runz. 'Black as a nigger's armpit.'

The three company commanders stood together, their glances moving from the mountain to the men and back again to the mountain. They looked thoroughly perplexed and Dobermann was gesticulating furiously, every now and then slamming his fist against the palm of his hand.

'We should be up there,' he kept repeating. 'We should never have let the swine get a foothold.'

'How d'you know they're even trying?' asked Roske irritably. He too was agitated, for he hated not knowing what was happening; he liked things cut and dried. Either attack or defend. But this. Were they going back? What the devil was happening?

'For God's sake, Dobermann, I don't know any more than you do.'

'Perhaps we're going back into strategic reserve,' tried Huth.

'Strategic reserve! At a time like this, when the big offensive's

obviously started. Don't be bloody daft!' Dobermann marched away for a few steps and then back again.

'Look at the men,' he snarled. 'They don't like all this mucking about either.'

'By the looks of them,' Roske said, 'they're damned glad to be sitting here with whole skins.'

'Right then,' shouted Acting Company Sergeant-Major Hufnagel at his company. 'Let's get some of those weapons cleaned, shall we. We're not drifting down the Rhine on a bloody holiday cruise. You never know when you're going to need them next.'

So they waited in this unexpected oasis, below the steady moan of the big British shells curving endlessly above them in a vast invisible arch of sound, and the slamming roar of the fighters on their way to blast the German guns that still flung back their shells defiantly, despairingly, swamped by this deluge of high explosive.

Lieutenant-Colonel von List walked from his Orderly Room for the last time carrying his little dog in his arms; behind him stalked Sergeant-Major Tomas, very erect, the perfect picture of a German regular soldier. For he too had put on his best uniform and polished his boots till they shone in the early sun. Following them came the Quartermaster, stumping along with a very set expression, and Medical Officer Buchner chewing a twig broken from a passing branch.

The officers and men of the battalion gawped at the strange little procession.

'Bloody hell,' muttered Hufnagel to Wiederheim, 'where the blazes are they off to? Hitler's funeral?'

'On your feet,' boomed Tomas, but von List shook his head gesturing at the men to sit down. 'Let them rest while they can.'

He faced them in silence. They stared back at him curiously. Something's up, they thought to themselves, shifting restlessly or fiddling with the rifles across their knees. They'd never seen him look like this. And all dolled up as if he was going to a swank party. Men glanced at each other furtively. You never knew with this one. Perhaps it was some bloodstained counter-attack. Mass suicide for the lot of them. That's the worst of officers, the things they could make you do.

'Can you hear me?' he shouted.

'Yes, Herr Oberst,' a few voices answered.

Herr Oberst! The last time he'd ever be called that. The memory of Clausitz's screaming rage was vivid in his mind. Traitor! Coward! Defiler of Germany's uniform! Once he himself had been privileged to hear their beloved Führer, whom they had all followed so very willingly during the days of conquest and champagne, rant and rave in that same tone of shrieking hysteria.

'Herr Oberst.' He heard Tomas's whispered reminder. Of

course, there was still a job to be done. If only his side didn't hurt quite so much. And all because of a filthy Siberian bayonet in some war that could have had nothing to do with this one.

'Private Kumitsch!' His first words staggered them, he could see that. Kumitsch stood up.

'Come out here, please.'

Kumitsch stood to attention before the Colonel. His face was streaked with black; the peak of his cap hung awry, cut half away by a splinter, and his uniform was soaked dark with Damme's blood.

'That was a very brave thing you did,' said von List. 'If it hadn't been – ' His words were lost in the angry whine of the aircraft. He waited, looking up at the top of Colle, his mountain. There wouldn't be much more time. He fumbled at the Iron Cross on his smooth, smart tunic with his one hand. A few German shells were landing on the summit now. Trudi trembled and whimpered. 'It's all right, it's all right.' He succeeded in removing the cross. Without a word he took a step forward and pinned it on to the dirty, torn, blood-spattered tunic of Private Kumitsch. Then he stood back and saluted.

'You've earned the damned thing,' he said with the sad ghost of a smile. And so have most of you, a dozen times over, he thought, looking round their tired, stubbled faces. You stupid fools, he thought with sudden pitying anger, to have followed so long and with so little complaint. Again his eyes went to the summit of the mountain he had promised to guard. Hurry. For God's sake, hurry. They'd be there any minute. Though a large white sheet flew above Rocca San Michele that might not be enough. The fog of war. In the fog of war men often went mad and shut their eyes.

'I have just spoken to the Divisional Commander on the telephone and told him . . . ' he paused while the planes dived through the smoking sky . . . 'and told him that I am surrendering the Monte Colle position.' He saw a sea of gaping faces; Kumitsch, still rigid at attention, with wide eyes; the officers turned to statues.

'I have come to this – this painful decision after much thought.' How were they taking it? 'And entirely on my own responsibility.' Still no one spoke. He shook open the paper in his hand and started to read:

'Men of the First Battalion, you must know as well as I do that this war is lost.' Not a voice was raised in protest. 'We shall all be needed by a Germany bled white – ' With a sudden sharp gesture their Colonel scrunched the paper against his chest and threw it from him.

'For God's sake,' he cried. 'Surely we know each other well enough to call a spade a bloody spade.'

'Yes, Herr Oberst,' called out Hufnagel. 'We don't need speeches.'

'What's to happen to us?' shouted a voice.

'Which would you prefer,' shouted Buchner suddenly in answer. 'A prison camp or my sharp little knife?'

'Or six feet of Italian earth?' added some wag.

'Will the Quartermaster come with us?'

'Yes, will he still feed us? Are houses still to be built on Sauer?' The Quartermaster stood there with tears in his little eyes, trying to look his usual pugnacious self.

'I can't order you to do this – ' But von List's words were drowned by shouts and even cheers.

'We don't need orders for this.'

'Haven't we done enough?'

'Send some of those Party swine up the hill!'

Von List held up his hand.

'Yes, give them a taste of Tommy's guns!' The cries were savage as those of wild beasts.

At last he made himself heard.

'I'd like to thank you,' he began, but got no further.

'It was a pleasure, sir.'

'We enjoyed every moment of it.'

'If ever you need us again, Herr Oberst.'

They were like children suddenly let out to play after hours in the class-room.

'It's us who should be thanking you, Herr Oberst,' called Hufnagel.

'I wish all of you the very best of luck, wherever you may go and whatever you may do.' His throat threatened to choke him.

'And the same to you, Herr Oberst,' squeaked Maulhard with all his heart.

In a sudden burst of fire from flak guns von List said something to Sergeant-Major Tomas.

'Weapons over here, and hurry it up!'

By now many faces were turned anxiously towards the mountain top.

The rifles, the Schmeissers, the Spandaus, carried in so many cases through so many countries, were thrown with a clatter on to the mounting heaps and, as each man stepped up and dropped his weapon so at that moment he ceased to be a soldier.

Then it was the turn of the officers. Roske flung down his pistol with a careless gesture as if the whole business was of no possible interest to him. Huth hesitated but followed suit. Watching, von List thought, what would Ziegler have done? And Simmering? And, most of all, Holmers, who had done this before?

He was startled from his thoughts by an angry, roaring bellow.

'Men,' yelled Lieutenant Dobermann when it came to his turn, 'are we all miserable cowards? Are we going to give up when German soldiers are still fighting for the Reich?'

He was pale and wild eyes started from his head, foam touched the corners of his mouth. He tore at the flap of his holster. Sergeant-Major Tomas drew back the cocking handle of his Schmeisser.

'Let's have no parlour tricks out of you,' he warned, jerking the muzzle slightly.

'Cowards! Contemptible swine! Call yourselves soldiers!'

'Cool off,' said Hufnagel, his ex-Sergeant-Major, 'and you won't come to any harm.'

'Lieutenant Dobermann!'

But Dobermann was beside himself. He swung round on von List.

'You've done this,' he stormed. 'You've led us into this miserable mess.'

'Yes, Lieutenant, I have.'

Glaring round him like a baited, maddened animal Dobermann let out a sort of strangled bellow and made a dash for the path leading up the mountain. At the beginning of the slope he stopped, waving his pistol.

'Won't anyone follow me?' He waited in vain, watched by four hundred pairs of interested but, in the main, unsympathetic eyes.

'I'll show you how a German officer can die,' he shouted, not without dignity. 'Long live Germany!' With that he sprang up the track.

'Come back,' shouted von List. 'You bloody fool, come back!'

They watched the Lieutenant making his way up the mountain, standing helpless below as the first of the assaulting infantry appeared for an instant on the skyline before starting down the slope, dodging among the rocks.

Dobermann went on up the track paying no heed to von List, who called him back time and time again. The men watched his progress spellbound.

'The crazy bastard,' cried Hufnagel. 'The stupid, crazy bastard!'

Half-way up the Lieutenant raised his pistol and began to fire at the British advancing in short rushes down the slope. The bullets buzzed uselessly above the rocks, but one, by one of those freaks of chance so common to war, hit a guardsman in the temple, killing him without a groan. The watching Germans ducked or flung themselves down as the Bren gun bullets whipped through the trees; some instinctively crawled towards the great pile of weapons.

Von List saw the tracer strike home in Dobermann's body, watched him spin slowly like a wobbling top and then sink to his knees, as though praying to the rising sun. The next burst knocked him violently sideways and he lay with his legs kicking feebly. He tried to raise himself on his arms but fell back with a

terrible, sobbing cry that echoed across the bright face of Monte Colle.

'Stay where you are,' von List shouted at the men. A few were on their feet; others were crawling away through the trees; one or two had grabbed rifles from the pile. 'Throw down those weapons!'

They all froze where they were, gazing up the mountain.

'I'm going up,' said von List.

'Hadn't you better take this?' Buchner handed him a grubby handkerchief. 'It's never in all its short life performed a more worthwhile job,' he added with all his old cynical amusement.

'I'll come with you, Herr Oberst,' said his old friend Tomas. 'We've been through worse than this together.' He glanced contemptuously up the track. 'It's not Ivan up there.'

'Put your hands up then. And you two?' He nodded at Roske and Huth. 'If the officers go then the men will follow.'

'Might as well.' Roske shrugged. 'Coming, Huth?'

From their positions among the rocks the British were looking down suspiciously, their rifles to their shoulders.

'Hold your fire!' An officer got cautiously to his feet.

'Do you want to surrender?'

Lieutenant-Colonel von List, holder of the Knight's Cross with the Oakleaf, Swords and Diamonds, waved the handkerchief in acknowledgement and began to limp up the path.

Beside him went Private Kumitsch. Behind came Tomas, managing to look as if he was on parade, and the officers of the First Battalion.

'First exercise you've taken for some time, eh, Sauer?' Buchner chuckled. The fat Quartermaster was panting heavily on the steep incline. 'Never mind, you only have to surrender once.'

Von List struggled upwards holding his little dog. His side was on fire, but his mind was numb so that he hardly noticed what went on around him.

'You all right, Herr Oberst?' He felt Kumitsch's hand beneath his elbow.

'Yes, Kumitsch. I can manage this last little drama on my own.'

They reached the body of Lieutenant Dobermann, and here von List stopped. Dobermann's lips were drawn back in an expression of fierce hatred, his dead blue eyes shone very brightly in the rays of the Italian sun, and the little breeze stirred his thick blond hair. Somewhere von List heard a loud voice shouting in English, but he did not move. Looking down at the big, crumpled body, he said, half to himself. 'At the end of the day God knows which was the right answer.'

Private Kumitsch looked at him with great compassion in his eyes.

'Both, Herr Oberst,' he said gently. 'Both.'

EPILOGUE

London: April 1965

KARL VON LIST waited for his wife at the station, leaning slightly on his stick and impervious to the week-end crowds that jostled and pushed on every side like a loud, tormented sea.

Then he saw her coming towards him and his face lit up with the same little thrill of pleasure he always experienced on seeing his wife after however short an absence.

'You shouldn't have come,' she said with fond reproach. 'All this standing is so bad for your leg.' They kissed. 'But thank you, darling. It was sweet.'

'Are you hungry?'

'I had some food with Margarethe before leaving. She sends you all her love. But what about you?'

'I wouldn't mind a cup of coffee.'

They got a corner table for two in the noisy, glaring station buffet. Ledi von List pushed the welter of dirty cups and glasses to one side and blew the dead cigarette ash on to the floor. She watched her husband moving slowly forward towards the big blowsy girl working the coffee machine. Though small and inconspicuous in his dark suit beside the three tall young guardsmen standing in front of him he stood out with his scarred face, so amazingly young still under the short grey hair, and the proud tilt to his head. Suddenly she saw him in his grey uniform, red-striped breeches, the Knight's Cross glinting at his throat and the polished belt round a waist still slim as that of a young man.

'You should have let me do it,' she said as he brought the coffee and two sandwiches in cellophane. But he would never allow her to stand in queues. 'You've had plenty of that nonsense,' he always said firmly. He made a face over the coffee.

'I still find it remarkable that we could have been beaten by a people who drink stuff like this.' He smiled, crinkling the starfish scars. 'But then they are a very remarkable people.'

'How did it go?' she asked.

'I had lunch with Lumsden, which went on till three, then we went along and talked for about two hours to a very senior officer with a face like a well-bred horse.' He inspected the contents of a sandwich. She waited. He would tell her, in his own time, in his own way. He'd always been like this. Very gingerly he tasted the dry ham.

'Now, darling,' he said eagerly, 'tell me all about Margarethe, and our first grandson. Tell me everything, from the beginning. You got out of the train. Was Charles there to meet you?'

'No. He was working all the morning . . .' She told her husband about the day spent with their daughter; now and then he interrupted with smiling questions.

'She's so happy, Karl. I wish you could have seen her. And little David. He's exactly like Walter was at the same age.'

'But aren't they all much the same at four months?'

'Oh, Karl, really.'

'David,' he said reflectively. 'David. It's funny to think of a von List with an English name. Don't argue, Ledi. To me he is, and will always be a von List.'

'I know, darling.' He attempted another short sip at the coffee.

'Charles will pick us up tomorrow and take us down by car,' said Ledi.

'How was he?'

'I've never seen him looking so well.'

'Like me, he's obviously married to the right wife.'

For a moment her hand rested on his.

'We're very lucky, Karl,' she said. A loud roar of laughter rose above the din from the table where the three young soldiers drank beer with their caps on the backs of their heads. She saw his eyes cloud darkly as he watched them.

'What is it, darling?'

'They can't be much older than the children,' he said, his thoughts far away. Then the cloud of memory turned to sudden, quick anger. 'He got off,' he said between tight lips. 'Clausitz got off. It was in all the papers.' He crumpled the cellophane into a hard ball. 'Found not guilty of his part in the murder of seven hundred Jews near Orel in the summer of 1942. Not guilty! He might just as well have shot them down with his own hand.' His voice had risen so that several people nearby stared at them in suspicious surprise, their attention riveted by the sound of angry German.

'You're upsetting them,' Ledi said mildly.

'Let's get out of here. It's stifling.' A lot of curious glances followed the limping man and the slim, well-dressed woman on their way through the crowded room.

'Bloody Boche,' said an elderly man to his friend at the bar. 'Always the same. Give 'em an inch and they think they own the place. Why don't they go back to their own damned country and leave the rest of us in peace. I was at Mons and I can tell you, some of the things I saw . . .'

On the way back to the hotel in the taxi, Karl was very silent, only speaking once.

'Not guilty,' he muttered. 'And by a German court. I know what Tomas will think.'

'Don't agitate yourself, darling.' She stroked his hand soothingly. 'I know how you feel. I know how I feel. But it's happened. There's nothing we can do.'

'Twelve years ago I thought there was something I could do. That's why I went back into the new army, because I thought in a stupid, idealistic way I could help to build a Germany that was strong and at the same time peaceful. A Germany that could look the world in the eye with something approaching a clear conscience.'

A fine drizzle drifted across the bright windows of the shops and the shining umbrellas moving slowly past.

'What's the use of talking,' he went on, lying back in the corner of the seat. 'I see now I was wrong. Clausitz goes free, and what I heard this afternoon. It all adds up. My God, how it does.'

Ledi steered the conversation back to Margarethe, and it was not until they were in their room that at last she said, 'Tell me, darling. Come and sit down and tell me – from the beginning.'

He turned from the window with a little snort of laughter. Opening his brief-case he took out a single sheet of paper.

'These are the outlines,' he said. 'None of it is top security, so you needn't think I'm betraying secrets on the marriage bed.'

Karl von List talked to his wife for ten minutes.

'That's about it then,' he said, replacing the paper.

'Well?'

'I turned it down.' He got up and began to pace the room. She did not speak.

'You're not angry, are you, Ledi?'

'You don't know me very well,' she said quietly. 'Even after all this time.'

'I couldn't take it. You do see that, don't you?'

'Of course, stupid.'

'Germany needs an army,' he said, limping towards her. 'Every country needs an army to protect its frontiers, its citizens, what they call its freedom. But there's always been something about a German army that spells trouble. I know, Ledi, I've worn its uniform for nearly thirty-two years, and I know. Especially when actively encouraged by its ex-enemies. Soon, very soon, all we're going to need is another corporal with a fiery tongue – '

'No, Karl, not again.'

'Yes, Ledi, again.' He swung round and faced her from the far end of the room. 'What they were saying today could lead to the Fourth Reich and the third Great War. Fought very differently, yes, but fought. Once again the generals, and that includes me, will be thinking offensively and then another generation will be flung into the flames. Is that what men like Ziegler died for? And Holmers, Kalbach, Telling? All the grey ghosts of a yesterday that could so easily become tomorrow.'

'You could be wrong, Karl.'

'Yes, I could very easily be wrong. Perhaps I was wrong twenty years ago. Perhaps I was wrong to go back into uniform. Perhaps I was wrong to give up this job – this plum job.'

'If you hadn't you wouldn't be the man I married,' she said. 'Nor would you be the man who did what you did on that Italian mountain.' He came and stood in front of her, taking her hands in his.

'You realise of course that I shall leave the army.'

'If that's what you think you must do.'

'That's what I *know* I must do.'

He left her and went back to the window. Opening it he took a deep breath of the night air.

'The first of the von Lists to leave the German Army of his own free will.' She saw him straighten up. 'And in his right mind. My ancestors must be spinning in their graves.' His shoulders shook slightly, but whether with laughter or grief she did not know. What will he do, she thought, seeing a sudden blinding glimpse of the future? What will he do outside the only life he knows? But all she said was, 'I'm going to have a bath. Don't go and catch cold there.' He did not answer.

The drizzle fell across the street lamps like fine gold dust and the great trees of the park shone as though daubed with varnish. All that horror and filth and fear so that a creature like Clausitz could walk grinning complacently from a court-room; so that others of his kind could come creeping back to power. Was that what he had surrendered for? Had Dobermann's answer been in fact just as effective? The roar of the traffic was the sound of the sea beyond the trees of Marienwald, the home he was unlikely ever to see again; that of a distant barrage . . . For every Clausitz there were a dozen Buchners, Huths, Kumitsches. Decent men who knew what war meant and wanted no more part of it. For God's sake, surely that was true. Had he walked up that mountain track to a shameful defeat all to no purpose? At least there were a few hundred men who must still remember the shame of that moment with something approaching gratitude.

A loud party of young people, men and girls, went by along the gleaming pavement, and their gay laughter rose to the man by the window. The glow above your city is not caused by flames, he thought; the aeroplane winking its little red light up there is carrying no bombs, nor is it diving on your streets with stuttering guns. With a wet screech of tyres a small, beetle car skidded to a stop at the traffic lights below.

'I was just wondering,' he said to Ledi as she came from the bathroom. 'What will happen to the faithful Jung?'

'Can you see him out of uniform?'

He shook his head.

'Siegfried will always give him a job,' she said, brushing her hair with long, slow strokes. 'They always need drivers.'

'Like he'd give me a job?'

'You know there's always been one waiting for you ever since you came back from the prison camp.'

Rottendorp Building Company, swollen to vast power and, ever since the death of Franz Rottendorp in 1949, in the hands of his son, Siegfried, late of the Waffen S.S. 'My dear Karl, five thousand a year, whenever you want it. There's always a job with us. You know that . . .' Oh, yes, he'd known that ever since the day they sent him back to Germany, one more defeated member of the Officer Corps. Step straight into it, my dear fellow. Someone with your qualities of leadership and your reputation. I assure you, Germany does not forget those who have served her well. But had he served her well? That was the question. Had he?

'But I know you won't take it,' Ledi said, swinging round on the chair. 'I know how you feel about Siegfried. I understand.'

Music came crackling from the wireless of a long red car at the lights: a man singing a song of Italy. With a roar the car shot away down the gleaming black river of the avenue, taking the song with it.

'We're going on a holiday,' he said and she smiled with relief at the note of happy purpose in his voice. 'Come here, Ledi.'

They stood very close to each other. His arm went round her shoulder.

'First we shall go and stay with Willi Roske and his charming wife and taste the excellent wines of his vineyards. Agreed?' He kissed the soft curve of her cheek.

'On the way we shall of course spend one night, possibly two, at that most splendid inn kept so efficiently by ex-Sergeant-Major Tomas at Biberach, and then by way of the Brenner Pass we shall reach Italy. Agreed?'

He kissed the corner of her chin.

'There's a place I want you to see, Ledi. I've wanted you to see it since – '

'Since April 14th 1945?'

'Yes.'

For the first time he was talking about it with his eyes full of the old, glowing laughter.

'I'm glad,' she said, 'I'm so very glad.'

'Perhaps we'll go to Siena and call on Huth and you can meet his wife. You'll like her, I think. A girl of spirit who once tried to kill me. But I've talked about her before.' He gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him.

'Is that a good idea?' He was laughing like a boy.

'Yes, my darling. It is.' She was laughing too, infected by his sudden wild happiness.

'And then?'

'And then,' he answered, kissing the tip of her nose. 'And then

we come back and are together, in the house of our dreams designed by Germany's up-and-coming young architect, Heinrich Kumitsch. And when it's built we ask Buchner and old Sauer and even the gallant Colonel Stempfe to such a housewarming as has never been seen in all the district of Hanover.'

'Karl, you talk the most wonderful nonsense, and I love you.' This time he kissed her on the lips.

Thank you Ledi,' he said without laughter, 'thank you for making me so very, very happy.'

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY LIMITED: PUBLISHERS OF NEL, SIGNET AND MENTOR PAPERBACKS

THE GUARDIAN is a man, small in stature but tough in character, who attempts the impossible. Ordered to defend the Fascist stronghold of Monte Colle, he finds his resources are drained, the Luftwaffe has vanished and Allied forces are building up a monumental stock of weaponry.

But Karl von List will not give up. Despite demoralisation amongst his men, no longer convinced that they are sure to win for Hitler and the Third Reich, the Colonel is determined that what he himself won in Russia shall not be lost in Italy.

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